

DÁVID BÍRÓ

MY VERSION OF THE STORY
(THE STORY OF A HUNGARIAN-JEWISH FAMILY)

Budapest, 1999

© Dávid Bíró

All rights reserved. No part of this manuscript may be quoted and/or reproduced without prior permission from the author.
The author asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work also in respect to the individual chapters of this book.

Contents

Preface	3
1. My Forebears	8
2. Grandmother's Views on Jews	24
3. Mother Ilka Gedó (1921-1985)	31
4. Mother's Road to Fame	67
5. Father Endre Bíró (1919-1988)	84
6. Brother Dani	104
7. I Grow Up	109
8. University Years (1971-1976) and the Start of my "Career"	115
9. My Elder Daughter, Zsuzsanna	127
10. The Devil Stays: Hungary's Negotiated Revolution	134
12. The Family Tree	153
13. Illustrations	154

Preface

And now I know that we must lift the sail
And catch the winds of destiny
Wherever they drive the boat.
To put meaning in one's life may end in madness,
But life without meaning is the torture
Of restlessness and vague desire--
It is a boat longing for the sea and yet afraid.
Edgar Lee Masters

Aged 46 I am sitting in my room and I look out of the window. On the other side of the street I see the roof of an old house, probably built at the beginning of the 19th century. Since my apartment is on the third floor and the building opposite us is only a one-story construct, as I am writing this, I see only three chimneys and the old corroded roof tiles. Behind the roof, however, there is a yard lined by a huge barren brick wall, half of which is painted blue. You can see the different hues of blue. The reason why you see these merry colors is that a hotel was built further down the road and its owners think that their guests should see something that makes them cheerful. Night is slowly descending on the city. Sometimes I hear the ticking of the alarm clock.

I think of City Park. It has got a zoo, a fun park, a swimming pool and several playgrounds and lots of dogs. In olden times, you could lie down on the grass, and if you felt like it you could even take a nap. Now that City Park is full of frightening dogs this is impossible. Nowadays, both dogs and their masters are very aggressive. As I was taking a nap one afternoon, under a shadowy tree, I suddenly woke up realizing that a big dog was standing over me and licking my face. Frightened, I grabbed my towel and chased it away. The following moment, I saw the dog's master running towards me in huge black boots, and by the time I had realized what was happening the man kicked me in the face. Fortunately, the kick did not hurt my eyes only my forehead. As if nothing had happened, the perpetrator and his gang of skinheads were leaving the scene slowly, quietly and proudly. I did

not want any more trouble so I did not call the police. I was sitting on the grass and continued reading in my book: "The debate continues to revolve around the question of whether the Hungarian Jews are in fact Magyars, differing from their Christian counterparts only in their religious affiliation, or merely a tolerated ethnic minority."

The author of this book is an orphan. The readers of this book should not feel sorry for him, since he is an orphan only in a very indirect sense. I was born into and raised in a family the only trouble being that it was a family in which I never had the feeling of being at home. My parents never ever told me anything about their lives. They never bothered themselves with the task of giving me an identity or speaking about their Jewish roots, Jewishness itself, and why they had practically completely abandoned their religion. I felt something horrible was experienced by my parents during the war. As a thick blanket of secrecy shrouded the whole thing, I could not find out what it was exactly. I could never get rid of the feeling that there was something wrong with us...

My father was a very talented and internationally recognized biochemist and my mother a painter. Since her death in 1985 her works have been exhibited at several venues both here in Hungary and abroad. I have always wanted to know more about my parents' past. This book is a journey into our common past.

I had a wonderful time writing the story of my family because the underlying research gave me a chance to get acquainted with my parents *for the first time* in my life. It is never too late. Only now do I have the feeling of having got acquainted with them. Only now did I get to know who they really were. Only now do I have the strange but also very satisfying feeling I feel that the blood of my forebears pulses in my veins.

All the characters in this story are beloved *strangers* to me. They are *beloved* to me because they are my parents and my forebears, my relatives, and they are *strangers* because the ones I had the fortune to know personally never spoke about their lives and the ones I had not the chance to meet were so little spoken about by my parents that they

were also strangers to me. This book is a desperate attempt to come to terms with the past by showing love and tenderness to those who have died even though many of these people did not treat me well. The most I could get from them was a sort of "leave me alone" or at best some friendly indifference. Nevertheless... I love all the people appearing in this story. My story is closely intertwined with theirs. *My Version of the Story* is full of success stories as well as tragedies indicating that families simply cannot avoid the turmoil of history and the tragedies and errors of one generation are passed on to the next one. My elder daughter from my first marriage, Zsuzsa could not escape the harmful influence of the family environment, and she has become a problem child. It is still to be seen whether my second wife and younger daughter will escape the turmoil and the shadow of past tragic events unhurt.

The story of four generations is told in this family history. The generation of my great-grandparents were well to do Jewish tradespeople, having established themselves in the business community. Their children, the generation of my grandparents were born around the 1880's-1890's, not always willing to follow their parents' profession. They became the great generation that gave the world so many famous geniuses, scholars and artists. They already had an inclination to abandon their religion. However, these people were really committed to a society that sheds its feudalistic elements and becomes a more decent community of citizens. In sharp contrast to their parents, this young generation did not want to become assimilated to the values of the gentry middle-class. The golden age of liberalism and religious tolerance started to disintegrate before the First World War. The horrors of this war challenged all the values of Western civilization and paved the way for Communist terror. Bolshevism gave a good excuse to the forces of restoration here in Hungary. The disintegration of historical Hungary is the watershed. Something terrible happened then in the soul of the Magyar nation. The Hungary arising after World War I did not want to democratize, and Jews became the scapegoats for all the social maladies. They were alleged to have paved the way for destructive social movements. Among the members of Hungary's ruling elite, the rejection of Bolshevism had become blended with a hatred of and contempt for Western democracy and for decency

in general. The third generation in this book is the author's parents. They grew up in a country where anti-Semitism was rampant, and it became part of the official state policies. This generation had even less religion than their parents did. The horrendous events of the Hungarian Holocaust dealt a serious blow to my parent's generation. The survivors did not reveal much about what they had gone through during the war. They thought the best way to protect their children was to keep silent about their identities and historical experiences. But there might be a more troubling explanation for their silence. They kept silent about the past since they suspected a real confrontation and a genuine reconsideration of past events would have forced them into an unbearable psychic state that could only have been overcome through emigration. The fourth generation, including the author of this book, has come to the end of the road. They either start to face the past, and, by embracing its events to regain their identity and dignity or they go on drifting in the nowhere land of zero-identity where they continue to be vulnerable.

The sad truth is that for my generation the dream of Hungary once becoming a normal and happy country is gone. What I have in mind is a country in which the rule of law and a culture of decency prevail. I have become so much alienated from my motherland that I decided to write this book in English. I studied German and English at the Arts Faculty of Budapest University, and I have translated a huge amount of texts, literary and professional alike, and I thought to myself I should not avoid the challenge of writing in English. I was fully aware that the manuscript of this book would have to be checked by a native speaker, but even this did not deter me from writing in English. To me writing in English ensures a detached attitude to the people and events described here. Writing in English about my family enables me to do the job of writing the story of my family. Had I tried to write my story in Hungarian, emotions would have overwhelmed me so much that this would have done harm to the quality of my text, following which my attempt would have petered out.

The family data in this family history originate from sources that I found in the estates of my mother, father and my paternal grandmother. I learned a lot from *Emlékezések Gedő Művészi*

pályájáról (Recollections on the Artistic Career of Ilka Gedő) written by Father in 1986 and translated by me into English somewhat later in 1987. I also used my paternal grandmother's written recollections and Father's memo on Mother's family. My Father gave a series of interviews to the Oral History Archives¹ of Budapest whose transcript consisting of some 500 pages was in Father's estate. Throughout the text I always indicate my sources. This family history is *not* a selection of translated passages from these written materials. It is the essence of what I know, of what I have understood or misunderstood concerning the history of my family. I have heavily relied on a huge quantity of family correspondence, on official documents, and on my personal experience and recollections, though this latter proved to be a rather poor source of information. Some 15 years ago I wrote several articles on the sociology of the family, so in some ways this book can also be conceived of as a continuation of my rather youthful and rash attempts in sociology. In telling about the facts I *never* used my imagination. I rather relied on common sense and my knowledge of social stratification with a particular regard to Hungarian social stratification approached from a sociological and historical perspective.

Now that I have finished this story, I feel like the disappointed adolescent, Holden Caulfield in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*: "D.B. asked me what I thought about all this stuff I just finished telling you about. I didn't know what the hell to say. If you want to know the truth, I don't know what I think about it. About all I know is, I sort of *miss* everybody I told about."

Budapest April 14, 1999

David Bíró

¹ *Oral History Archive, Budapest, 1981-1996, Budapest, 1997, edited by Gyula Kozák, Zsuzsanna Körösi and Adrienne Molnár, p. 38*

1. My Forebears²

My paternal grandmother Emma Graber was born on July 5, 1888. Emma had two sisters, Nelli, Margit and a brother Jenő who became an engineer. On the first day of the First World War, he was called up for military service, and, defending the Dalmatian coast, he served at a battery unit till the last day of the war. He did not take part in combat but he nearly died in an epidemic.

Margit Graber born on August 5, 1895, became a well-known painter spending much of her life in Szentendre. (She joined the artists' colony of Kecskemét in 1916 where she studied under Béla Iványi-Grünwald. Between 1920 and 1924, together with her husband, fellow-painter Vilmos Perlrott-Csaba, she spent a lot of time in Germany. Her compositions conceived in a post-impressionist style are exempt from complicated solutions.)

² Most of the *data* on the Gráber, Baumann and Bachruch families originate from Emma Graber's family recollections. Béla Kempelen /*Magyar zsidó családok I* (Hungarian Jewish Families Vol. I) Budapest, 1937, republished in 1999, p. 119.) writes as follows: „Is there anybody who does not know the jewelry shop located in *Váci utca* in Pest owned A. Bachruch and His Successor Ltd. There are fewer people though who know that this company has been in existence for more than a 100 years. The founder, Albert Bachruch came from Raudnitz in Moravia. Having settled in Hungary, Albert Bachruch founded a pipe factory in Selmecbánya and also manufactured the silver cups of the pipes. He primarily supplied Vienna customers with his products, and the enterprise started to flourish soon. In 1826 Albert Bachruch moved to Pest, where he opened a goldsmith's workshop where he was selling the jewels and goldsmith work that he himself made. The business was taken over by his son, Károly Bachruch (1851-1926) who had been a partner in his father's business since the age of sixteen. Károly went on a study tour, and studied goldsmith's craft in France, the Netherlands, in Belgium. Bachruch developed the company into a prospering business. He was accorded the rank of nobility with the pre-name *királykúti* in 1905 in recognition of his notable achievements. Károly's brother were also goldsmiths.

My grandmother's paternal grandfather, Miksa Gráber died in 1895. Her wife's name was Netti Pikler who gave birth to eleven children. Netti Pikler got her fortune by buying a herd of sheep for Kossuth banknotes at the end of the War of Independence in 1849. She somehow got wind of the fact that, due to Hungary's defeat, these banknotes would lose their value completely within a few days' time. So what did she do? She bought a herd of sheep. She invested in livestock and walked home with the herd. This took her a few days, but it was worth it.

Miksa Gráber was a teacher who could not make ends meet. He became a clerk with an insurance company, and then founded a paper factory in Nécspál and a petroleum refinery in Túrócszentmárton. The first offspring from this marriage was Jakab Gráber who became co-owner of the Turócszentmárton firm. (According to Sigmund Keszler's *Lexicon sämtlicher gerichtlich protocollierten Firmen der zur Stephanskronen gehörenden Länder* published in 1879 in Budapest, there really was a company named *Graber Miksa és fia* (Miksa Graber and Son Inc.). The second son was Mór Gráber who was my grandmother's father. Mór Gráber's mother tongue was German in which he was fluent both in writing and speech. He learned Hungarian only after he had moved to Budapest. Other uncles of my grandmother were Ármin Gráber, a railway engineer, Samu Gráber, a lawyer, and the youngest uncle, Károly who was also a lawyer. My grandmother knew her aunts (Matild, Mária, Rozália and Leonka) much better than her uncles.

After graduating from university my grandmother became a teacher. She was a member in the *Galilei Kör* (Galilei Circle), a leftist organization, linked in many ways with free masonry, which had started its activities in 1908.³ The spirit and mentality of *Galilei Kör*

³ W. O. McCagg Jr.: *Jewish Nobles and Geniuses in Modern Hungary*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1972, p. 108 ("If one regards the membership in the famous Galilei Circle, the club for young radical intellectuals whence actually came a major spark of the 1918-1919 revolutions, one may find a truly

had a decisive influence on my grandmother's and father's political attitudes, and, in retrospect, also on my political attitudes. The *Galilei Kör* started as a student movement that always emphasized its independence of actual political parties. Members of the second generation, my grandparents' generation were revolutionized by the poetry of Endre Ady. In spite of the unparalleled economic progress of the previous twenty years, it was this generation that started to guess what a phony historical act it had been for Hungary to accept the creation of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1867, and to compromise with the very same Austria that had defeated Hungary in the 1848-1849 War of Independence. It was this generation that started to fight for a genuinely democratic Hungary free from corruption and feudalistic entanglements. Most of the members of the *Galilei-kör* came from the Jewish lower middle-class. They were young students who abandoned their religion. "From the very first moment, *Galilei-kör* proclaimed the necessity of being committed to the truth. It challenged not only the superstitions of the past but also those of the present. (...) Compliance with moral standards has not been an imperative in Hungarian public life for generations. *Galilei-kör* gave us the thing in the absence of which life becomes a shame: the obligation to be selfless when it is the case of the rights and justice of others."⁴ Grandmother passed on this politicized attitude to the world that never led to an acceptance of Communism, but was always against social injustice, to my father. *Galilei-kör* organized several hundred lectures and taught illiterate workers to read and to write. My grandmother's sister, Margit Gráber recalls the *Galilei-kör* as follows: "My elder sister and brother were university students when they took me along to the lectures organized by *Galilei-kör*. In this free school, characterized by a leftist spirit, excellent scientists were delivering lectures on progress and the methods and world outlook of the natural

astounding number of names which subsequently figured high in the ranks of our century's international cultural elite.")

⁴ Károly Polányi: *Fasizmus, demokrácia, ipari társadalom*, (Fascism, Democracy and Industrial Society) Budapest, Gondolat, 1986. p. 190.

sciences. *Galilei-kör* organized a grand commemoration of the March 15, 1848 revolution at *Vigadó*, a well-known palace building on the banks of the river Danube in the heart of Budapest. Each year Endre Ady greeted this celebration with a poem. In 1912 I had the honor of having been commissioned to design the invitation card of the event.”⁵

In 1919 Emma Gráber was dismissed from her job for political reasons, for her involvement with the *Galilei Kör*. My grandmother and the other people, all former employees of the municipality of Budapest affected by this dismissal, started a lawsuit against the capital which they won, and grandmother got a monthly pension of about 80 Pengős.

My grandmother was always interested in psychology, and the problems of child rearing and family life. She joined the Hungarian Society of Individual Psychology. Setting up a private boarding-house for a few children, she devoted much of her time to the rearing of problem children, which was also a source of income for her, although there was also a servant at the house. One servant was named Aranka (Mrs. Lukács) and my grandmother made friends with her. She helped my grandmother at the end of World War II, at the time of the Hungarian Holocaust. Using Mrs. Lukács's papers, grandmother assumed a false identity, and she became a housekeeper for a woman who had become insane, but was a harmless woman. Expelling her to a small house in the suburbs, her husband did not divorce her, but stopped living with her, and it was my grandmother's task to keep house for her.

The great grandfather of my grandmother, Joachim Baumann was the first Jew in Pest who was allowed to build a house. This house, where my grandmother's grandfather, Zsigmond Baumann was born in 1837, is still to be seen under *Dob utca* 6. (I have his final examination certificate, declaring that, in the school year 1856/57, Zsiga Bauman, aged 19, following the faith of Moses, his mother tongue German, got a certificate of the first class. An enumeration of the school subjects:

⁵ Margit Gráber: *Emlékezések könyve* (Book of Recollections) Budapest, Gondolat, 1986. p. 190.

religion, Latin, Greek, Hungarian, German, history and geography. According to the overall ranking of the 39 schoolmates of his class, Zsigmond Bauman was 14th.) His wife's was Emma Mangold. She died at the age 28.

Zsigmond Baumann was not reared by his parents but by his grandparents. His father lived a gentry life style, and once he rode with his horse into the entrance of a big shop on *Váci utca*. This was meant to be a joke by him. He went to America. When Zsigmond was fourteen, his father came back to demand more money from his parents. He did not get any. Zsigmond's mother, the young and deserted wife fell in love with someone. She hoped to be able to divorce her husband. When this turned out to be impossible she started to suffer from melancholy. After finishing grammar school, Zsigmond pursued his studies at a Vienna university-level trade school. Then he became a broker of the commodity exchange. He mastered English so well that he became a correspondent of the London *Times* covering events at the Budapest commodity exchange. At that time, the Hungarian kingdom was one of Europe's breadbaskets, and wheat trading played such an important role on the Budapest commodity exchange that the news was relevant even in London. Zsigmond lost his wife early, and did not remarry. My great grandfather respected wealth only when it was coupled with learning. Zsigmond paid the fees of the French governess, who taught French to my grandmother, Emma and her sisters Margit, and Nelli as well as her brother, Jenő. Zsigmond Bauman never really liked those Jewish colleagues who bargained too tough on the stock exchange. These people often had the title of nobility. Once after a long and tough bargaining, Zsigmond backed down and let down the price. Then he asked his partner: "*Herr von X, und jetzt wer von uns ist der Edelmann?*" (And now, Herr von X, who from us is the noble man?")

My grandmother's father was Mór Gráber. He went to school in Turócszentmárton. In contrast to his brother, Mór did not get any higher education. He was sent out into the great world. First, he stayed with some relatives in Szolnok, then his maternal uncle, Ármin Pikler, a very wealthy tradesman, took Mór up into apprenticeship. Ármin Pikler had a small brandy factory. Mór Graber married Róza

Baumann, my great grandmother at the age of 32. This was an arranged marriage which nevertheless became a very happy one. Four children were born from it: Emma, my grandmother, Nelli, Jenő and Margit, whom I knew well and whom we called Aunt Médi. In the first ten years of their lives, the Mór Gráber family lived very well. They had a cook and a servant and, for a short period, even a governess. Mór was about forty-five, when he went bankrupt, and the brandy factory that he owned together with his uncle had to be sold. His health became weak, and a terrible conflict ensued between him and his well-educated father-in-law, Zsigmond Baumann. On examining the books of Mór Gráber's company, Zsigmond Baumann found that great grandfather had also invested his wife's dowry, which was thought to be a violation of gentlemanly fairness. The Baumanns regarded my great grandmother's marriage with Mór Gráber a misalliance. Emma Gráber remarks. "Mór Gráber's family did not have a great sense for reality. We governed our lives according to principles that we have taken more seriously than others did. However, what the four of us, me Margit, Nelli and Jenő got from our parents proved to be more lasting than the yields of sober practicality."

The aunt of my grandmother was Gizella Bauman who married Emil Fuchs, a factory-owner from Bohemia. The oldest of my grandmother's cousins, Oszkár was an agricultural engineer. Emil Fuchs had three children. Oszkár was an agricultural engineer who died in 1944. His younger sister Gitta died in Auschwitz. The third child, Leo became blind when he was young. When the Germans occupied Austria, he fled to England.

My grandmother's husband was Lipót (Bíró) Bachruch. The Bachruchs were an international family of jewelers. There were Bachruchs in Paris, Antwerp and maybe even in Brussels. The father of Lipót Bíró, Manó Bachruch (a jeweler who died very early at the age of forty) was the cousin of the great Károly Bachruch who bought himself the title of nobility.⁶ According to my grandmother's written recollections, the

⁶ W. O. McCagg Jr.: *op. cit.* p. 178 and p. 247 Károly Bachruch got the privilege of ennoblement in 1905 and got the name *királykúti*.

"great" Bachruch owned a jewelry shop in the very heart of the city on the corner of *Váci utca* and *Vörösmarty tér*. Károly was a very respected jeweler not only because he was very rich but also due to his unparalleled expertise in gems. As a young man, Lipót Bachruch was a shop assistant in this shop, and he had to put up with the cruel behavior of his uncle. The old Bachruch was reputed to have been kicking his employees behind the counter as they were holding a velvet tray on which some luminous and pretty expensive bracelets and rings were lying. "*Ja, mein Herr Baron!*" a kick. "*Jawohl, mein Herr Baron!*" a kick. The old Bachruch spoke German with the Viennese accent, because he believed this was more elegant. Whenever I walk past this shop, I think of the Bachruchs. Lipót Bachruch became also a jeweler who went bankrupt. He designed jewels. (In fact he was a self-taught design artist. He designed the beautiful Art Nouveau chair I am sitting in as I am writing these lines.) I found the photos of his jewel designs among the papers of my father. After the First World War, he founded a small silverware factory producing jewels. (They were one of the manufacturers of the buttons used on the uniforms of Horthy's army. One of the relatives asked my father: "How could you have gone bust having received such an excellent order?" My grandfather answered that they had nine-ten competitors who had squeezed his company out of this market. In the post-war period, Hungary experienced a very high inflation, and, as a result, there was a strong demand for jewels. After a while, however, people no longer wanted to buy jewels, and this was the other reason for the firm's bankruptcy. My grandfather had a congenital heart disease that worsened a lot in 1923. From then on, he had been practically always confined to his bed until his death in 1931.

Lipót Bachruch who later on adopted the Hungarian family name Bíró had two brothers, Aladár and Rezső. The brothers' mother was Henriette Neuwohner, the daughter of a tailor named Sándor Neuwohner whose mother tongue was German. I often heard in the family that Aladár became insane and spent his life in a mental asylum. Rezső had two sons, Margit and András. Margit's children are Tuta (a boy from her first marriage) and Iván and Péter from her second marriage. Tuta was a very talented sculptor who committed suicide. He jumped from the fifth floor of a building, but, through luck

bordering on the miracle, he only broke his leg. He was hospitalized with his broken legs. The doctors did not pay attention, in fact they told him that the following day he would be taken to a ward of psychiatry. Tuta did not wait for that to happen. He made a second suicide attempt. He jumped again, this time from the hospital window, and smashed himself to death. Péter also became also mentally ill. He is suffering from schizophrenia. He has been in hospital for many years now. His brother, Iván is not willing to help him. This is no criticism of Iván's attitude, since I do not and cannot know what terrible things have happened. András Biró, the son of Rezső Biró and another of father's cousins became a journalist and fled from Hungary after the 1956 revolution. All I know about him is that he speaks several languages and was an employee of the United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organization in Rome. Then he moved to England where he was editor-in-chief of the magazine titled *Mazingira* dedicated to the issues of development in third world countries. Later on he came back to Hungary and was awarded the alternative Nobel Prize for his sociological projects helping minorities, especially Hungary's Gypsy minority. I tried to establish closer contacts with him, but he consistently refused to talk to me. The lack of mental stability, which is so characteristic of Western Jewish families in general, is stronger on this side of the family than among the ancestors of my mother's line.

My maternal grandmother was Elsa (Erzsébet) Weiskopf. (In earlier documents the family name is written as Weisskopf.) Elsa (1890-1954) had two sisters Aranka (1888-1921) and Lenke (1892-1984). I still have a photograph from 1898 showing Mrs. Weisskopf with her three daughters. Mrs. Weisskopf is a lovely and charming woman standing in the middle. Her three girls are around her. The youngest, Lenke is sitting with one arm leaning on a table her other arm resting on a book. In this photo mother Ilka Friedmann beams out those nearly visible emanations of love on all her three daughters and the eldest daughter, Aranka beams out her love on her two younger sisters. The three sisters wanted to become educated and sophisticated, and their parents had the financial means to get their daughters an excellent education. They did not know what atrocities, what horrors are being prepared in the devil's kitchen: "The hand of fate shall also seize

Hungarian Jewry. And the later it occurs, and the stronger this Jewry becomes, the more cruel and hard shall be the blow, which shall be delivered with greater savagery. There is no escape."⁷

Aranka, born on May 10, 1888, became an Art Nouveau graphic artist and studied art in Budapest. She died of cancer very young, in the early 1920's. Father and mother always told me that she had died on the very same day as Ilka Gedő, my mother was born, which is not true since I have found two color post cards designed by Aranka with some greeting lines addressed to Ilka, my mother. The date on these cards is September 6, 1921, and mother was born on May 26, 1921. One of the cards, having the following text in Aranka's handwriting "this card was printed prior to the outbreak of the First World War in July 1914", depicts a very Jewish-looking man with a beard, the other shows a police officer, a very corpulent, moustached tall man wearing an overcoat with a long sword dangling from his side. Aranka adopted the Hungarian family name Győri, meaning coming from the city of Győr. In fact this is the town where her mother came from. Aranka may have known the sister of my paternal grandfather, Margit Gráber, the painter mentioned in the above. I have Aranka Weisskopf's school certificate from the years 1903-1904 indicating that Aranka was born on May 10, 1888. (Notes from her 1913 calendar: March 21, 1913, Friday: movie in Gyöngyös; April 30, 1913, Sunday: the Zoo; May 10, 1913, Saturday: Aranka 25th birthday; June 1-2, 1913 Sunday and Monday; summer is fantastic but I am... August 26, Tuesday: I have a day off, I roam the city; September 26, Friday: the school buys a drawing; October 26, Sunday: excursion to Dobogókő; November 11, 1913, Tuesday: a letter from London; December 20, Saturday: in the afternoon Margit Kaffka, Béla Balázs; December 21-24, 1913 Sunday till Wednesday: a lot of suffering and dejection.")

I still have the register from the Budapest College of Arts where Aranka studied at the graphics department as a guest student in the years

⁷ Theodor Herzl in a letter dated March 10, 1903. Quoted by *The Holocaust in Hungary (Forty Years After)*, edited by Randolph Braham, Columbia University Press, 1985, p.186.

from 1912 to 1916. I have also found a few cards in German sent to Aranka by Robert Alexander (corporal), a cousin of the Weisskopf girls: "Vukovar. May 6, 1916/ Dear Aranka, Hopefully, you will get this card before May 10 which is your birthday. I wish you happiness and health, which is the most precious asset in these times. I also wish that you should always be as happy and beautiful as you are now. You should always find satisfaction in your art. On your birthday please think of the soldier in Vukovar who, on that day, would rather be with you."

The father of the Weisskopf girls was Jakab Weisskopf who was a broker at the Budapest commodity exchange. He was born on May 16, 1855. I know this because I have a greeting card written by Aranka from 1905 (May 16, 1905) with the following text: "Let us be grateful to God who allowed you to reach the age of fifty. My heart is overflowing with unutterable happiness because I can write this letter to you. It is the most affectionate desire of my heart to see you reach the highest age along with all those who love you in happiness, affluence and good health so that I can return to you all the affectionate love and tenderness with which you lead me on the road of life." I have several greetings written by the Weisskopf girls (Aranka, Elsa and Lenke) to their parents. This is the greeting they wrote at the end of 1897: "Dear Good Parents! Please accept our warmest thanks for all the things that we received from you during the year. We promise to be diligent next year, so that your heart may rejoice. Wishing you a happy New Year, your grateful little girls, Aranka, Elsa and Lenke." And this is the greeting Elsa wrote on New Year's Day 1899: "Dear Parents!/ Today, on New Year's day, I reveal to you the emotions of my heart. I am so grateful to you for your benevolence and love that words cannot express this. Therefore, may the Lord give you a long life./Your loving daughter: Elsa."

Mrs. Weisskopf's maiden name was Ilka Friedmann. In her youth Ilka Friedmann lived in the Western part of Hungary close to the Austrian border in a town named *Győr* (the German name of the town is *Raab*). Her father, Bernát Friedmann was a jeweler. ("*Bernát Friedmann, Silber- und Goldbearbeiter*" is listed among the registered companies of Raab (Győr) in the already mentioned *Lexicon sämtlicher gerichtlich*

protocollierten Fimen der h. Stephankrone gehörenden Länder). Ilka Friedmann had an elder sister named Cäcilie who, according to a wedding card, married Leopold Alexander in August 1870. The card is signed by "B. Friedmann and wife." Ilka Friedmann was a charming and beautiful woman whose mother tongue was German. I still have her beautiful love letters addressed to Jakab Weisskopf in German. I tried to read them, but I cannot decipher the German handwriting, even though the external look of these letters is beautiful. Jakab (referred to in the German letters as Jacques) married Ilka Friedmann on July 5, 1887. Jakab Weisskopf's parents lived in Gyöngyös. Erik Steiner, my mother's cousin, writes as follows to my father: "Jakab Weisskopf had many brothers and sisters. Juli and I visited Gyöngyös, our grandfather's native town as children. Then, one of grandfather's sisters, Aunt Borcsa was still living. Her wicked remarks and impatience were proverbial in the family. (...) We did not know Jakab Weisskopf, but we heard a lot about him from our mother, Lenke."

The cousins of the Weisskopf girls married very famous and rich men. One of them was Mrs. Vilmos Detre whose husband was one of the founders of the Weisz Manfréd works. Another cousin was Mrs Aladár Kaszab. The Kaszabs were a very rich family. The Weisskopf family rented postal rights in *Gyöngyös*, a town in the Northern region of Hungary. Jakab and his brothers were rumoured to have had an inclination to kick packages with the inscription "attention fragile" into to the transport cart. Jakab Weisskopf had a sister named Margit who married Marcell Grósz.

The Weisskopf girls wrote wish-you-well cards to their parents, and many of these cards are in French. The Weisskopf family probably had a French governess. In a letter dated April 23, 1895, Aranka writes as follows: "In spite of the very changeable weather, the three of us, accompanied by the mademoiselle, who is untiring also in this respect, go for a stroll almost every day. She takes along also her pupil, and we walk down along *Stefánia út* as a flock. During these walks we cause some astonishment through our conduct, since we are in a good mood and do not mind very much whether it is good manners to do something or not. But why did I say we? I walk by the side of the mademoiselle and I am the embodiment of good manners. Only

seldom do I shout, but that is not a problem. I do not give a damn if people think I am a mad French woman, but they should not think I am a Hungarian woman with bad manners!!!! (...)Today I went to an exhibition with Ili. There are lots of beautiful pictures, but there are just as many bad ones. (...) Best wishes from Aranka who will be seventeen years old within two weeks and three days." There are lots of clues indicating that the marriage of Ilka Friedmann and Jakab Weisskopf was a happy one. In a letter dated March 10, 1965, Lenke, the youngest of the Weisskopf girls remembers: "During the years the marriage anniversary of our parents was always celebrated by the family. Aranka made the arrangements for these events with lots of flowers. The three of us sang a song and mother and her three girls always started to cry for happiness, saying how wonderful life was. But this should come as no surprise, since *then* life really *was* happy." This is what the Weisskopf girls wrote to their parents on one of their wedding anniversaries (July 5, 1902): "My dear parents!/ This great day inspires my heart with happiness because I can wish you something which may express my gratitude. (...) I wish you, therefore, and the same wish comes from my younger sisters, that the mighty Lord may give you all his blessings and give you strength and health, so that you may stand in front of us as paragons to be followed. And we will do our utmost to make you happy. Your loving daughters: Aranka, Elsa and Lenke." The Weisskopf family might have been a family in which the role distribution of the spouses was similar to what was recommended in a family book in 1911. This is how the woman's roles are described there: "A woman does her job in the best way when she can subordinate her will to her husband's proper will. She should understand that she has to subdue herself to the man who is her husband even though all the other men in the world pay homage to her. Without getting to know her husband's nature and without adapting to it, there is no happiness, no peace in this world... Proper child-rearing, keeping the house tidy and clean and creating a comfortable home for the husband are to be regarded as work if all this is done conscientiously. This is woman's vocation and duty. This is no small task even if one gets help for performing it." According to the book, "a man should be brave and undaunted, aware of his rights and duties. He should possess an iron will, and should not be diverted from the most appropriate road. However, he should listen to the

advice motivated by the love of his wife, and he should not retreat into the castle of his worries and concerns." ⁸

Elsa Weisskopf married my grandfather, Simon Gedő in 1919. Her sister Lenke Weisskopf married Erwin Steiner who was a trader and had a small margarine factory in Budapest. Erwin died on Christmas eve in 1944. He had permission to leave the ghetto to go to his small factory. On Christmas Eve everybody asked him not to leave the ghetto. He went nevertheless, and was never seen again. The slaughter of Jews had already been going on for days then, and on Christmas day the killing became very intensive. It is almost certain that Erwin became the victim of one of these slaughters. Erwin had two children: Erik and Júlia. Júlia Steiner fled Hungary in 1956 after having been jailed for three years. In the years after the Communists take-over in 1949, she worked for the Israeli embassy. Julia was arrested on January 30, 1953 and was in prison until 1956. In February 1957 her mother, Lenke Steiner emigrated to Israel. Another prison in-mate was arrested in the then "fashionable" way. As she was walking home from work, a huge black and curtained car of the secret police suddenly stopped by her and the elegantly dressed driver accosted him, "Miss would you mind getting into our car?" Miss started to scream, "Help! Help! Yugoslav kidnappers want to kidnap me! Help!" However much she resisted, the men from the secret police hustled her into the car, and took her to the nearest police station where she got an extra portion of beating for her misdemeanor and impudence. (At that time, the Soviet Union had already declared Yugoslavia an archenemy, and Hungary followed suit in condemning the Yugoslav "imperialists". This was the time when the worst period of Hungary's Stalinist dictatorship got started. Mátyás Rákosi, the head of the Hungarian Communist Party, then named the Hungarian Workers' Party, who wanted to be the "best disciple of Joseph Stalin", was instructed by the Soviets what to do, but he himself was quite eager to organize show-trials the Soviet way. As a result of these trials, some of the most powerful cadres of the Communist party were

⁸ *A magyar család aranykönyve (The Golden Book of the Hungarian Family), Budapest, 1911*

also executed based on concocted charges. One of the accusations leveled against László Rajk, the former Communist minister of the interior was that he had organized a "gang" which had secretly cooperated with the Yugoslav "imperialists and traitors" whose agents infiltrated Hungary and the public life of the nation and were also depraved criminals to such an extent that they had the cheek to simply kidnap people from the streets. At the time Júlia Steiner was imprisoned, a strictly centralized Hungarian press carried reports on the crime of kidnap perpetrated by Yugoslav imperialist agents. That is why Júlia Steiner's fellow prison in-mate started to shout: "Help, Yugoslav agents want to carry me off!", even though she knew she was carried off by the secret police.

Júlia's brother, Erik left Hungary in 1949. Erik married Ziona Kutcher. Two children were born from this marriage. Ephraim was born in 1968 and Noemi in 1970. Julia married dr. Baruch Yaron. Three girls were born from this marriage: Jael, Ruti and Chana.

My maternal grandfather was Simon Gedő. Simon was born on September 3, 1880 and died on September 11, 1956. My grandfather's father was Alexander Goldenberg. Leaving several brothers and sisters and her mother behind, Alexander migrated from a town named Tukum located some thirty kilometers from Riga in Latvia (then a part of the Russian Empire) to Brassó. He married Katalin Künneleim and had nine children. The oldest of them was Simon Gedő, my grandfather. I still have the copy of a letter written in flawless German dated April 14, 1914 addressed by my grandfather to his uncle informing this uncle probably living somewhere in Russia of his brother's death. The letter is written on the stationary of Manó Gedő who was a photographer having his shop under *Ráday utca* 54 in Budapest. "Dear Uncle! On behalf of my mother and my sisters and brothers I inform you that your brother Alexander died on April 9. It has been more than forty years, since our father, his parents, and his brothers and sisters have left Tuckum and wandered to Hungary. As you know, our father helped his mother for many years and finally he had his mother come to Hungary, where she died shortly after her arrival. More than ten years ago we received your photograph showing you with your son. However, we have not heard anything from you

since then./Our father had been strong and healthy until most recently. He was suffering from disease only in the past few months. He was doing his job even on the last day of his life. He did not suffer a lot; he died after brief agony. His whole life was a tough struggle for the daily bread, and he devoted all his energies to raising his children. You know he was a good son of his mother, he was a good brother and he was a good father to his children. All his friends loved and appreciated him as a pious, honest and good man. He was loved in all the communities where he worked as a cantor. / For many-many years we have not heard anything from the relatives of our deceased father. Now that we mourn for our father we could get solace from hearing from you. For this reason, you are asked to confirm the receipt of this letter. / As regards our family, I inform you that from the nine children of our departed father three sons and one daughter are married. With the exception of the married daughter, living in the province and married to a watchmaker and having three children, all the other sisters and brothers live here in Budapest. The married sons are tradesmen. One of the sons is a photographer. Two sons are lawyer candidates and one son is secondary-school teacher. The youngest daughter, aged 22, is a clerk. / Hoping that I will get a reply to this letter, I greet you on behalf of my mother and my sisters and brothers and sign as Dr. Simon Gedő . Professor, Hungary. Budapest, VIth district, *Nagymező utca 35. III. 19.) "*

The family name Gedő has nothing to do with Lipót Gedő, an artist who had some international reputation. My father writes that we can be sure that there is no relationship between Ilka Gedő and Lipót Gedő. An enumeration of a few of the names of Ilka Gedő's uncles and aunts: Adolf, Béla, Judit, Árpád and András. Simon Gedő was a secondary-school teacher of German and Hungarian literature at the Jewish Grammar School of Budapest. He went to university around the turn of the century and one of his colleagues there was Gyula Juhász, the famous Hungarian poet with whom Simon Gedő had an extensive correspondence.⁹ In one of Gyula Juhász's letters the

⁹ *Juhász Gyula Összes Művei, Levelezés 1900-1922*
(Complete Works, Correspondence 1900-1922)
Budapest, 1981, pp. 91-94, p. 101, pp. 106, pp. 124-
125, pp. 139-140.)

"noble, sad and wise Gedő "is mentioned, in another Simon Gedő is referred to as "a great soul, *a noble heart* (the poet's italics), a true man, a man with a sad and moving fate."

He was suffering from hypochondria, which was attributable to the fact that in his youth he had contracted tuberculosis from which he fully recovered. My grandfather was born and raised in Brassó. His father, Alexander Goldberg was a very famous cantor. On account of his drinking habits, Goldberg had to leave Brassó. He moved to smaller communities. Simon, the eldest child in the family, had nine younger sister and brothers. The Gedő family became poor. My father recalled Simon remembering his childhood: all the Gedő children were given a handful of nuts and a slice of bread for supper. My grandfather died in 1956 when I was three years old. When I was a child, I personally met one of Simon's sisters, Judit Gedő.

Simon Gedő studied Hungarian and German literature at Budapest university. Later on, he earned a Ph.D. degree by writing a dissertation titled *Madách Imre mint lyrikus* (Imre Madách as a poet). In spite of his vast knowledge, he did not make a career. He became a grammar school teacher of German as a second language and Hungarian literature. Simon had a huge library much of which has been preserved by my parents. Most of the preserved books are in German including the complete works of the great classic German writers and philosophers. In the first half of the century, being a teacher at a secondary school meant a higher social prestige than it does today. (In addition to teaching, Simon devoted most of his energies to scholarly pursuits most of which centered in classical German literature.) He wrote several studies on Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Among his papers I found an essay titled *Mire tanítja Goethe az ifjúságot?* (Goethe's Teachings for Youth) which was written for a memorial of the 100th anniversary of Goethe's death. Another of his studies, preserved among his papers in his handwriting is entitled *A bibliai őstörténet Goethe megvilágításában* (Goethe's Interpretation of the Ancient Bible Stories). Simon Gedő's translation of Goethe's *Maximen und Reflexionen* was published in Hungarian. He also

translated the Hassidic tales of Martin Buber into Hungarian. I still have a letter written by grandfather to Martin Buber inquiring about the terms and conditions under which a selection of Buber's collection of Hassidic tales could be published. Simon Gedő was befriended with many illustrious figures of 20th-century Hungarian literature.

Towards the end of his life, Simon's friends deserted him. Simon was a lonely man. He did not like his colleagues at school. He thought they were haughty hypocrites. Probably he was right. My grandfather had a dignified and somewhat ceremonious manner, and he was not really good at disciplining his naughty pupils. According to father's recollections, when he came to know the Gedő family, he had the feeling that Simon was somewhat of an outcast in the family. My grandmother, Elsa Weisskopf became alienated from her husband. Mother writes in a rather bitter tone about her parents' marriage: "Let us take, for example, a woman who does not become aware of her femininity. Her father is to be blamed for this, because, from early childhood on, what she hears and sees when her mother talks to her father clearly indicates that her mother does not love her father. Her father is not the respected head of the family, but a psychopathic invalid. Mother has never shown the emotions and words of a woman who is in love with her husband. Mother was living with *me*, instead of father. Did I play the role of a boy or that of a girl in this collusion?"

2. Grandmother's Views on Jews

Strong anti-Semitism colors my grandmother's views on the Jewish question. This does not surprise me. For many Jews the fact that the Holocaust could have occurred and the fact that they were among the survivors was something that could not be psychologically explained and comprehended. Unfortunately, my grandmother belonged to these Jews. However, it is to her credit that she thought about these problems, and did not just suppress the trauma, concerns and fears that were on her mind with regard to the Holocaust, but tried to understand what had happened.

This is what is written by Emma Gráber on the Graber and Bauman families in her memoir: "What was common about the mentality of the

Gráber and Bauman families was their unqualified adherence to their Jewishness. Although this was not said openly, they unconditionally accepted the view that all Jews were better than gentiles." Emma Gráber describes that this prejudice was based on two facts that could not be challenged at that time. Jews lived a harmonic and balanced family life (attributable, among others, to the fact that the family served as a safe haven since Jewish men were exposed to humiliations out there in the harsh world) and few of the Jewish husbands were drunkards. My grandmother adds the following: "The third reason why Jews believed themselves to be superior to gentiles was the belief that Jews were more intelligent than non-Jews. This was a prejudice that Jews shared with non-Jews..., and maybe this was the prejudice that has proved to be the most harmful for Jews. It made Jews self-complacent and among non-Jews it fostered the suspicion that Jews were not to be relied on. This belief was just based on the fact that, given their skills in commerce and business, Jews could adapt to emerging capitalism much better than non-Jews still immersed in and tied by the traditions of feudalism." My grandmother fails to mention that there was also a negative stereotype of the submissive and cowardly Jew which may have been attributable to Jewish immigration into Austro-Hungary from Galicia, although she herself distinguishes between Western Jews and Eastern Jews remarking that "our family are coming from a Western Jewish family, meaning an increased likelihood of the absence of psychological stability."

Here comes another bitter remark from Emma's memoirs. She describes how much her maternal grandfather, Zsigmond Bauman hated those very rich members of the Hungarian Jewish community who bought themselves titles of nobility. Zsigmond Bauman felt that Jews should not crave for such feudal titles, maybe because he believed that the Jewish middle classes and upper classes should not accept feudalistic values and should not be social climbers. He believed that the ennoblement of Hungary's Jewish capitalists was an anomaly.

Emma has the following to say on this: "There were some members of this newly emerging Jewish nobility who got these titles on account of real merit, since Hungarian industry and commerce, which

experienced an unparalleled progress in the last quarter of the 19th century, were created by these people. To be sure, Hungarian industry and commerce could have emerged a few decades later as a result of natural developments without getting into Jewish hands completely, and Hungarian Jewry could have avoided the catastrophe that came half a century later. "

I hasten to remark that these views are preposterous. How could an intelligent woman like Emma Gráber have drawn such a conclusion? These lines suggest that at the time of writing the memoirs, I assume around the mid-sixties, Emma believed that the Hungarian Holocaust was the punishment of Hungarian Jewry for having been too successful and for not having exercised self-restraint in pursuing success. My grandmother's view suggests that the action was unrestrained ambition and success, in fact a tragic overreaching and the response to it was the Holocaust.

This is what one of my favourite historians William O. McCagg has to say about the same process in his book titled *Jewish Nobles and Geniuses in Modern Hungary*. "The new urban classes of Budapest emerged in Hungary, a country of noble hegemony with no tradition of urban political power and social dignity to guide them. Indeed, in so far as they were Jewish they bore the outcast stigma of the medieval ghetto and from the start tended to subservience in the tradition of Viennese court bankers. Further, they could see that the banners of European liberalism were already waving in the hands of Magyar speaking Hungarian nobility."¹⁰ Thus arose the "socio-political collaboration of Hungary's Jewish capitalists with the country's nobiliary old regime." This political collaboration is very harshly criticized by Randolph L. Braham who points out that Jewish leaders, guided by economic motifs, failed to develop a Jewish national consciousness and "sided unconditionally and uncritically with a socially antiquated and nationally repressive regime, never becoming conscious of their peculiar role and responsibility within a

¹⁰ W. O. McCagg: *op. cit.* p. 224.

multinational state." ¹¹ He could have mentioned, however, that broad strata of the second-generation of the successful Jewish middle classes and the lower middle classes became opponents of the regime prior to the First World War.

The huge mobilization of energies, which the industrial revolution had unleashed for Hungary, slowed down after the turn of the century. "The energies of this great mobilization could escape, in the long run, as energy tends to escape, (...) only through sublimation and emigration, through intellectual expression."¹² Here is a listing of just a few of the *internationally* known names of this generation which grew up in the Hungary before the First World War, and emigrated as young men: Ferenc Molnár, playwright, Theodore Herzl, journalist, the founder of Zionism, Arthur Koestler, journalist, Georg Lukács, philosopher, Leo Szilárd and Edward Teller physicists, Karl Polányi, an economist, Michael Polányi, a scientist and philosopher, László Moholy-Nagy, painter and architect, Karl Mannheim, sociologist, Arnold Hauser, an art historian and sociologist, Béla Balázs, a film theoretician, Charles de Tolnay, an art historian.

It is only a matter of conjecture to decide whether the development of capitalism could have led to genuine bourgeois democracy arising in Hungary since the First World War and Hungary's disintegration which followed in its wake disrupted a process of fairly normal development. My grandparents were young Jewish intellectuals when "a tragic rift" had come between "Christians and Jews, between the older liberals and the newer radicals, a devolution from their harmonious symbiosis to their bitter division in less than six years."¹³

¹¹ Randolph Braham: *The Politics of Genocide; The Holocaust in Hungary*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 12.

¹² W. O. McCagg: *op. cit.* p. 225

¹³ John Lukács: *Budapest 1900 A Historical Portrait of a City and its Culture*, New York, Grove Weidenfeld, 1988, pp. 200-201

How this conflict would have developed if the Great War had not broken out, nobody knows.

Emma Gráber's study on the Jewish question is full of self-accusations. In fact, it is not by chance that father remarks, "My mother was nearly an anti-Semite" (OHA). Emma noticed that "Jews who played a leading role in Hungary's economic life and press quite often acted aggressively against Christian tradition. Jews could not overcome the prejudice of having been persecuted everywhere even though they believed they were innocent. ... Jews shared the prejudice with non-Jews according to which Jews were much more talented and educated than non-Jews. This prejudice resulted in an inferiority complex among non-Jews and gave further impetus to racial hatred and anti-Semitism. Jewish war equipment deliveries were of inferior quality, in fact, Jewish tradesmen cheated the state and the army.....Due to the fact that Jews were better positioned in the society they could escape being drafted into the army at the start of the First World War. Among Jewish men it has become a tradition to try to escape the draft and even to brag about how they have managed to escape the draft due to good contacts. ... At the end of the war, when the Hungarian empire disintegrated, Jews played an outstanding role in the bourgeois revolution and the short-lived Communist dictatorship which followed it." (End of the accusations.)

The whole of the essay is full of self-accusations. It places overdue emphasis on the fact that, during the time of the Hungarian Holocaust, many Jews received help from their Christian compatriots, and it fails to mention that the overwhelming majority of Hungarians were completely indifferent to Jewish suffering, and many of them were all too eager to loot and plunder Jewish goods. The Nazis found in Hungary rightist and ultra political forces who were eager to help the Germans eliminate the Jews. A series of anti-Jewish measures were taken preparing the road for destruction. The great majority of the Hungarian population actively or passively approved of "de-Jewification" measures. They were happy with their towns and villages becoming "*judenrein*". In today's terminology we would say that the population did not oppose, in fact, most of them approved of ethnic

cleansing, although the number of those who knew what evacuation would finally lead to was few.

A recurring idea of this whole shameful treatise is that Jews were and are wrong in believing they have been persecuted unjustly everywhere and throughout the whole of history. (By implication, this means that there is "just" persecution... and the victims themselves are to be blamed for the horrors they had to experience.) Emma even adds that the mental recovery of Jewry living in the Diaspora and Israel depends on abandoning this false belief. I hope my grandmother knew that crimes against humanity (mass murders, mass deportations, precursors of today's ethnic cleansing!) can never be justified. In a normal civilized society citizens may have sympathies and antipathies, likes and dislikes but these should be completely separated from coercive actions by the state. In a democratic society the use of coercion can take place only within limits defined by law with the legislative function springing from parliament and with the strict separation of the three branches of power. To be and to have been successful does not fall under the category of having committed punishable acts. It is unbelievable to me how an intelligent woman could have come to this conclusion.

One can hold different views on the role of Jews, but the implication of grandmothers' ideas is that Jews somehow deserved what they got. This really *is* a horrendous idea. The humiliation of Hungarian Jews followed by their extermination was a monstrous war crime, a crime against humanity. Traits, attitudes and the behavior of a minority can be evaluated in various ways, but one should not try to justify, even if indirectly, any crimes against humanity.

True enough, around the turn of the century a conflict started to emerge between Jews and non-Jews. My grandmother typically remarks that there are facts that remain facts even though anti-Semites often quote them. At the turn of the century Jews accounted for about five percent of the Hungary's population but they gave 12.5 percent of her craftsmen, 54 percent of her tradesmen, 43 percent of her bank clerks, 45 percent of her lawyers and 49 percent of her physicians. However, if we consider the social stratification of

Hungarian Jewry as a whole, it may be said that it did not differ very much from that of the whole of the society.¹⁴ Nevertheless it had a more bourgeois social stratification due to the fact that the number of Jewish peasants was very low.

The defeat in the First World War made the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire inevitable. The Hungarians under the government of Count Mihály Károlyi were the last to declare independence in November 1918. On March 22, 1919 the Hungarian Soviet Republic was proclaimed under the leadership of Béla Kun. The overwhelming majority of the leaders of the short-lived Soviet Republic were Jewish, which was a good excuse for rekindling anti-Semitism. It was simply ignored that a huge Jewish middle class was also the victim of the red terror, and the overwhelming majority of Hungarian Jewry opposed the dictatorship of the proletariat. In August 1919 the Hungarian Soviet republic collapsed, and Budapest was occupied by Romanian and French troops. After their withdrawal, the forces of the new order led by Admiral Miklós Horthy instituted the white terror claiming thousands of victims. Two-thirds of Hungary's territory (including also regions whose population was overwhelmingly Magyar) were lost as a result of the Treaty of Trianon. One-third of the Magyar people became inhabitants of the neighboring states. Between the wars Hungary remained a semi-feudal country dominated by large landowners and by the gentry middle class. The duality of the social structure did not change. At the top of the social ladder the landed nobility faced the tiny stratum of big capitalists, mainly Jews. The middle class was not homogeneous either: you had the gentry middle class facing the bourgeois middle class whose majority were Jewish professionals. Property, age sex and qualifications restricted voting rights and democracy was severely limited. The nation could not psychologically cope with the loss of two-thirds of the territory of the Hungarian kingdom. Political life was to a great extent characterized by semi-Fascist principles. In the wake of the world recession, internal unrest followed. Hungary gradually came under the influence of the

¹⁴ *Magyarország története (History of Hungary), Vol. VII/1*
edited by Tibor Hanák, Budapest, 1983, pp. 464-465

German Third Reich. In November 1938 Hungary received back territory and residents from Slovakia and in August 1940 43,000 square kilometers of Northern Transylvania. In April 1941 Hungary entered the Second World War on the side of Germany.

A long series of anti-Jewish laws was followed by the demise of Hungarian Jewry. Around May 15, 1944, the deportation of provincial Jews to concentration camps was started. The Hungarian Jewish community lost 564,500 lives during the war including 63,000 before the German occupation. Of the 501,500 casualties of the post-occupation era 267,800 were from Trianon Hungary--85,500 from Budapest and 182,300 from the provinces-- and 233,700 from the territories acquired from Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia during the period. Of the 825,000 persons considered Jews in the 1941-1945 period in greater Hungary, about 565,000, (68 percent of the total of Hungarian Jewry) perished and only about 260,000 survived the Holocaust. 78 percent of the Jewry living in the countryside and 52 percent of Budapest Jewry died in the Holocaust. Historical evidence, among others the fact that on July 6, 1944 Miklós Horthy had the deportations stopped, shows that had he wanted to save the victims he would have been able to do so.

3. Mother, Ilka Gedő (1921-1985)

My mother was born from the marriage Simon Gedő and Elsa (Erzsébet) Weiskopf on May 26, 1921 in Budapest. Ilka's father was a teacher of Hungarian literature and German at Jewish grammar school of Budapest. My mother *never* told me *anything* about the story of her life. This is only partially attributable to the fact that at the end of World War II she lived in the Budapest ghetto, where her life was in constant danger. The other reason why she did not tell me anything about herself was due to her carelessness and the fact that she was an artist, and as such, she concentrated on her art only.

Mother did not realize that by keeping completely silent about her past she created a mystery whose dark clouds would cast a shadow of fear and anxiety on me. Based on her correspondence and writings as well as on what art historians wrote about her, I try to reconstruct the

story of her life. Ilka was born and raised in a family where she had every opportunity to become an educated and sensitive girl. Being a teacher of Hungarian literature and German, her father could help her studies a lot. The fact that the mother tongue of Simon Gedő's parents was probably German or Yiddish meant that Ilka Gedő was very close to German culture.

In 1933, at the age of twelve Ilka spent a few weeks in Vienna at the home of aunt Éva, a German-speaking relative of the Gedő family. Who aunt Éva was, I will probably never learn. This is what my mother, aged 12, wrote: "Dear Mother! It's so good and beautiful here. The only trouble is that aunt Éva has a very anxious nature. Yesterday night we had a fantastic time. We went to the Opera and saw Turandot. It was lovely. Aunt Éva dozed off during the first act and slept till the end of it, but that is just because she has already seen this performance. We had a box seat on the third floor. Before taking our seats, I was shown around the huge theatre with its magnificent dress circle, balcony and gallery. The Vienna Opera House is greater than ours. The auditorium is also huge. From the box seat we could see everything, also the orchestra. I had excellent opera glasses and it was so funny observing faces from the audience. The stage setting was marvelous. Mária Németh sang one of the leading parts. There was thunderous applause at the end and the beginning of acts. The first act was dreadful and sinister... The executioners were dancing in a red light while sharpening and clicking their knives. There was also an execution. To be sure, this is not so important. I could see the mandarins with their long Chinese plaited hair. Everybody was beautifully dressed, the emperor, the people and the princess. One could see Chinese lanterns everywhere. (.....) I send a thousand, a million kisses to the beloved ones at home./Ili.'

My mother could express herself in German very well indeed. She had a huge vocabulary and she could read any text including literature with ease. At grammar school she also learnt English and French, but she did not have to learn Latin. Ilka's mother, Elsa came from the well-to-do upper middle class family of the Weisskopfs. She, too, could read German, French and English. She may have learnt German from her

mother, Ilka Friedmann whose mother tongue was German. From early childhood on, she was learning French, the language of elegance.

Elsa Weisskopf, my maternal grandmother was a lonely and romantic soul. She loved poetry and literature. In fact, she engaged in some literary pursuits. Her published translations include a tale by E.T.A. Hoffmann and two tales by Goethe. In the children's weekly *Cimbora* I found a story written by Elsa Gedó titled *Óring, Különös történet egy óriásbabáról*. (*Óring, The Strange Story of a Huge Doll*). Other stories were published in the June 10, 1928, May 19-26, 1929, April 14, 1929, June 9-14, 1929 issues of *Cimbora*. Unfortunately, they are not really good. I found a letter in Mother's estate from Milán Füst, one of the major figures of 20th-century Hungary literature, who knew the family because he was befriended with Simon Gedó: "Dear Ilka, I apologize for the delay in answering your letter. I try to work but this is often disrupted by disease. /To sum it up, these are the works of a charming and lovely soul. The writings are not without any talent, but they are just what one calls amateurish. And that is for sure. I really am sorry, but this is the most I can say. Hugs, Milán Füst."

Mother's talent is well reflected by drawings made during the summer vacation months. I have several notebooks filled with lovely scenery pictures drawn in color pencil. A series of drawings is about a summer holiday spent at Lake *Balaton* in the summer of 1932. This series is in fact a picture report of the places and scenery Ilka and her parents saw. Given the fact that the scenery pictures were drawn by a child aged eleven, the viewer is really surprised how mature the composition is, and how these drawings done in color pencil already have an atmosphere of their own. One of the drawings, my favorite, shows a garden with the garden gate on one side of which there is a long pole topped by a wind-cock which is in fact a soldier made of clay, dressed in red trousers and a blue shirt and holding swords in both arms. The title is *The Soldier Defends the Fatherland with Two Swords*. Based on the high number of drawings to be found in my mother's estate, the whole of Ilka's artistic development can be reconstituted. Thus writes Ilka in one of her note-books: "I was 11 when in a summer vacation

camp by the side of the Danube Mr. Rabinowsky¹⁵ reprimanded me, «The reason why you want to be alone is not that you can draw. No. You draw just to have an excuse to be alone...»"

In the summer of 1931 mother was sent to *Zebegény* a village on the banks of the Danube. In 1934 she spent the vacations with a children's group at *Római Part*, a resort in the direct vicinity of Budapest. In 1936 she took part in a vacation program organized for Hungarian and American children: "Dear Mom and Pap!/ I can't yet write on the details. The «stock» of children: Mária, the two Americans, Jiny and Alice, Nelli and the least sympathetic, Hanna. There are two other grown-up children. We arrived, we had lunch and we got our rooms assigned. (...) The boat trip was pleasant, full of strong sunshine. I drew and I lived; I had a good time. Anyuli, write me a long letter, please. Hugs Ili." On June 2, 1936 she wrote: "The full moon was beautiful. The Danube had the color of purple, blue and green. The Moon was breathtakingly beautiful." Another summer vacation was spent without parents at a mountain village in *Bakonybél* at the house of the local elementary school teacher. On July 9, 1938 she wrote to her parents: "In the morning I visited the fork makers once again. They do the carving in sitting on a strange chair, and then the fork is assembled out of its parts. Uncle János, one of the fork makers, said that I spoke Hungarian in a strange way with a German accent. To me the peasants' dialect is not strange, because I heard it from Annus" (Annus was probably the Gedő family's housemaid.) On July 7, 1939 Ilka wrote to her mother: "Dear Mother/ We took a fantastic stroll across the forest. The forest, with lots of berries and a magic of its own, is beyond any human imagination. We also visited the hunting castle." On July 5, 1939 Ili writes: "The wheat harvest will start within two weeks, which is going to be a very good subject for drawing. Until then, I can find other subjects: working peasants and children."

¹⁵ **Máriusz Rabinowszky (1895-1953) an art historian and critic. His home was a meeting point for leftist artists in the inter-war period. His wife was Olga Szélpál.**

Mother struggled a lot with representation, but by the age of nineteen, she had become an artist who had almost completely mastered the technique of drawing and graphics and also displayed a promising talent to such a degree that it is not an exaggeration to say that Ilka was a self-taught artist and a child prodigy. János Frank, a well-known Hungarian art historian writes as follows: "I witnessed the 17-year-old Ilka Gedő drawing pictures in an ad hoc drawing school. Even then, her art reflected the work of a fully developed artist." In the book review written on my mother's art János Frank writes as follows: "Concerning the intellectual background of Ilka's art I have the following memory. Around 1940 a woman painter named Tott (Toto) took up two teen-aged disciples Ilka Gedő and me into her studio, located actually not far from the Gedő family's home. In addition to drawing a lot, the personality and painting of our mentor were very attractive; this suggestive and ironic young painter studied at an arts academy in the Germany of the Weimar Republic, and brought along with herself the free and unimpeded style and urban folklore of the Berlin of the late 1920's. In contrast to my drawings, Ilka Gedő's work reflected an overflow of talent, that additional something that cannot be described in words."¹⁶ The young artist got a letter from Anna Lesznai, a poet, writer and a graphic artist: "Dear Little Girl, I found a lot of pleasure in your letter: you are a kind-hearted, lovely and intelligent little creature, and this could be *one* of the reasons why you have the potential of becoming a true artist. In addition to learning the technique of art, drawing a lot, and practising painting a lot, you should strive at developing in yourself genuine humanity, love, understanding, open-mindedness and a patient discipline that will serve your art the best. (..)."

With the exception of data gathered by art historians on this period I know next to nothing about Ilka's life in the period between 1939 and 1944. Mother never told me what she was doing then. What I do know for sure is that she continued to attend various drawing schools and she produced a considerable body of graphic work. In the autumn of 1939 she attended the Free School of Tibor Gallé. In 1940 she

¹⁶ Élet és Irodalom, Budapest, August 21, 1998

participated with drawings in the exhibitions of the OMIKE (Hungarian National Cultural Society of Jews). In 1939–42 she was taught by Viktor Erdei¹⁷, a friend of the Gedó family. (Viktor Erdei's wife, Ada Karinthy was the younger sister of Frigyes Karinthy, one of the greatest writers of 20th-century Hungarian literature.) In 1942 mother participated at the exhibition entitled *Freedom and the People* at the Centre of the Metal Workers' Union organized by the Group of Socialist Artists. My mother never was a Socialist. She always kept aloof from politics. In the inter-war period, all progressive trends were somehow opposed to the feudalistic regime of Miklós Horthy. Also people who had to do nothing with the workers' movement, and the social democrats were allowed to join this circle of artists. This exhibition was suppressed after three days. In 1942–1944 Ilka studied at the private school of István Örkényi-Strasser. Right after the war she started to make oil paintings. Only one of them has been preserved undamaged. Ilka must have destroyed the others. There are about five oil paintings cut up with a knife in a very brutal way. From two or three of these paintings a very handsome, slim and tall young man looks back on the viewer. Who he was I do not know.

On reading the adolescent Ilka's correspondence with her parents, I had the impression that the relationship between Ilka and her parents (especially the one between Ilka and her mother) was very close and cordial. There is ample evidence in these letters that Simon and Elsa supported Ilka's artistic pursuits wholeheartedly. On the eve of the war Ilka wanted to go to Paris to study at the Academy of Fine Arts. I was quite surprised to see that there was not even a hint in the correspondence at what was in the making then. I have a letter of recommendation dated August 19, 1939 (two weeks prior to the start of the war) from Gustave Végh, the president of the Hungarian Association of Book Illustrators and Advertisement Artists, testifying that Ilka was "an arts student with promising talents and a refined

¹⁷ Viktor Erdei (1897-1945) was a painter, sculptor and graphic artist. In 1924 he lived among the Jewish peasants of the north-eastern region of Hungary. In 1934 he showed his drawings depicting the life of these communities at a remarkable exhibition.

taste." Other correspondence with a person named Olga Székely-Kovács also suggests that practically every preparation (including financing) has been made for the journey. Due to the war, the plans of studying arts in Paris had to be dropped. This is what I have found in Ilka's notebooks from 1951 on the planned journey to Paris: "«Ilka is a very talented artist,» commented some old pigs or sometimes honest chaps. She should not go to the Academy of Arts; her art would only be spoilt. I visited these people because my mother urged me to do so. I also visited Pátzay twice. The first time with mother, when mother insisted I should study art in England. A few years later, mother said there was nothing worse than an unaccomplished artist. (She was right.) Probably she wanted me to go to the Academy. Then mother desperately wanted me to go to Paris. It was not me who wanted this; I was completely passive, I did not think, I did not plan, and did not decide to become an artist, *even though I was a woman* (italics added by Ilka). I was completely unaware of this problem. But even though I was not aware of this problem, I ought to have had some commitment to art as a vocation, some ideas on the prospects and difficulties of being an artist, and on how good it would be to go to Paris and to study there, and to live among artists.... Instead of this, I was completely absorbed in drawing and drawing (...) Considering the possibilities of study was so much different from the enthusiasm with which I drew at the age of 17, when I spent the vacation in *Bakonybél* hunting after motifs all day long. My drawings overflowed with energy and dynamism and their sheer quantity somehow prompted some people to say I should not learn at an academy. It may be safely assumed that good old Viktor Erdei was absolutely well intentioned when he said: «Do not go to the Academy! Do you want to learn from them? The teachers there could learn from your drawings.»" Maybe this view was also motivated by his opinion on the members of the faculty. ¹⁸ (...) Is it possible to paint pictures and live in a marriage? All the good painters are lonely wild animals banished from society. Or maybe I am wrong. Maybe in spite of all this, it would have been good to spend three years in the Budapest Arts Academy and to spend three

¹⁸ In the inter-war period, the Academy's whole staff was fired twice and replaced with a faculty believed to be politically more "reliable".

years in Paris as Lajos Vajda did. Such a six-year learning exercise does count. It is already *something*."

During the war Ilka regularly went to *Szentendre*, a small town on the banks of the River Danube forty kilometers from Budapest. She may have known some of the artists living there. Mother's correspondence indicates that she knew Júlia Vajda¹⁹ very well. I found a lot of letters written to Ilka by her parents. Her postal address then was: Mrs. Gyula Perlusz under *Főtér 16* in *Szentendre*. (On June 2, 1943 Ilka writes to her mother: "I am in continuous contact with Ada. Tonight I visit the Singers together with Ada Karinthy. I have already met Kmetty and Barcsay for a very short time. It is understood that Vilmos Csaba-Perlrott is also in *Szentendre*, but I have not seen him yet. I do not look forward to meeting him." On August 3, 1942 Ilka writes as follows: "We have terribly hot weather here. I will also go to *Monostor*. Ada and also Júlia Vajda are there.")

Mother drew beautiful color pastel drawings depicting the buildings, the townscape and scenery of *Szentendre*. The choice of topics, the depiction and the composition were traditional. However, the colors are fantastic here. Strong reds, yellows and greens alternate with the soft blue of the sky. As a result, these landscapes and townscapes emanate the strength and the energy of talent.

On March 19, 1944 the German army occupied Hungary. The Regent of Hungary, Miklós Horthy promised the Germans to deliver a few hundred thousand Jews for employment in Germany. On March 24, 1944 a government decree ordered Jews to wear a yellow star. With the exception of Budapest Jews, by May 15 the concentration of Jews living in the countryside had been completed and their mass deportation to death camps got under way. On June 9, the Ministry of the Interior decided that 30,000 of the 60,000 Budapest homes occupied by Jews had to be vacated. On June 17, 1944 a decree ordered Jews to be relocated into yellow-star houses. Later on, June

¹⁹ Júlia Vajda (1913-1982) was painter and the wife of Lajos Vajda. She was in close contact with the Lajos Szabó circle.

24 was set as the deadline for finishing the relocation. According to estimates, by the June 24 deadline 170,000 Jews had been moved to buildings marked with stars.

Relocated Jews were allowed to take along their personal belongings, but if they were unable to do so, the property (recorded in an inventory) had to be stored in one room of their left residence. (I found such an inventory: "Inventory drawn up in three copies under *Fény utca 15, I/13* /the IInd district of Budapest/ on the occasion of Mrs. Lipót Biró's moving out. Part One: objects left behind in the flat: four sofas, eight cupboards, three desks, four tables, six easy chairs, eleven chairs, two bookcases one bookshelf, one bathroom mirror, one sideboard, 1 wardrobe with 12 doors, four faulty Persian carpets, one travelling trunk: bed clothes, four cushions, three eiderdowns, approx. 700 books, one bench, one military bed, one chandelier, 21 framed paintings, two unframed paintings, one empty frame, seven drawings framed and glassed, 6 drawings and four blankets etc., etc. (...) Budapest June 23, 1944 signed by the janitor (Ferenc Máty), by the civil and air raid defense commander (László Kiss), the tenant (Mrs. Biró Emma Gráber)."

A series of decrees was issued restricting the movement of Jews with the purpose of humiliating them. Jews were allowed to leave their designated buildings only between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. By July 6, 1944, the deportation and destruction of Hungarian Jewry living outside Budapest had been finished. More than 500,000 Hungarian Jews were killed in German concentration camps. "The drive against Hungarian Jewry took place on the very eve of Allied Victory, when the grisly details of the Final Solution were already known to the leaders of the world including those of Hungarian and World Jewry."²⁰

The deportation of Hungarian Jewry caused an outrage in international politics and Miklós Horthy received threats from the Allied powers saying if he failed to intervene and save the rest of

²⁰ Randolph Braham (ed.): *The Holocaust in Hungary Forty Years After*, New York, Columbia University press, 1985, p.186.

Hungarian Jewry he would be regarded a war criminal and treated accordingly. (This, by implication, meant that he was acquitted of all the crimes he committed before!) On July 6, 1944 (a month after D-Day in Normandy) Miklós Horthy, the Regent of Hungary ordered the deportations to be stopped. "The success of Horthy's belated action is another piece of evidence already demonstrating that the German demands for the Final Solution could have been refused or sabotaged even after the German occupation." ²¹ No time had been left for mass deportations from Budapest, since Soviet troops were closing in fast on the city. In the summer of 1944 Ilka Gedó was forced to move to a yellow-star house at 26 *Erzsébet körút* (a house very close to where the ghetto was located) and this is where she stayed until January 18, 1945 when the Pest side of Budapest was liberated by the Red Army. At first, this building was part of the emergency ghetto hospital located at 44 *Wesselényi utca*, which later became a shelter for abandoned children. The town was encircled and besieged by the Soviet army, while Hungarian fascists terrorized the inhabitants of the ghetto.

The situation of Budapest Jewry and of every inhabitant of the town had become worse when on October 15, 1944, the Hungarian fascists took over power. On October 20 and 22 decrees were issued ordering all Jewish men aged 16-60 and all Jewish women aged 18-40 to be drafted. According to estimates 25,000 men and 10,000 women were deported. On November 2 a decree was issued drafting all Jewish women who could sew. On November 3 a decree ordered the registration of all Jewish women aged 16-40 for doing service in connection with "national defense".

I will probably never learn the exact circumstances under which my mother managed to escape the drafts. However, there is a hint in father's recollections: "Ilka was in great danger twice. Once she and her girlfriend had to go to a railway station. They escaped deportation because there were not enough railway carriages. They were told to go home and come again the following day. (...) Ilka went home and thought to herself I would be fool if I went there again, and she did not

²¹ *Ibid*, p.186.

go there any more. (...) The other: once there was a police raid and she hid under the eiderdown, and when Ilka's name was called, an old rabbi, with a thin female voice, shouted «present». The police searched through the flats, and did not find Ilka."(OHA) On November 29 the ghetto was set up. Located in the Seventh District it occupied an area of 0.3 square kilometers. As the siege of Budapest started, hunger, lack of proper drinking water, and inadequate health conditions started to take a heavy toll on the Jews of the ghetto and of the yellow star houses. Even in the winter of 1944, the Hungarian Nazis were desperately trying to liquidate the surviving members of the Jewish ghetto in Budapest. Conditions in the yellow-star house my mother stayed in were horrid. Towards the end of the siege, many old people died of hunger and disease. In the last days fighting between the Germans and the Red Army was so intense that the dead could not be taken out to the cemetery; they were put down at the end of the yard, and their bodies were covered with cardboard.

Prior to 1944 Ilka drew drawings wherever she went. One could, in fact regard these drawings to be picture reports of what she saw. In the midst of this daily horror, my mother started to draw portraits of her fellow ghetto occupants. According to the videotaped recollections of my mother's cousin, Júlia Steiner Ilka spent her days drawing and drawing and reading books all the time. For the inhabitants of *Erzsébet körút 26* this was a period of fear and dread alternating with hope. Everybody knew the siege of the town would be over. However, no one knew what horrors might happen until then.

In 1985 in the obituary on my mother's death Júlia Szabó, a well-known Hungarian art historian wrote as follows: "As a young woman, Ilka Gedő was forced to live in a house in which there were regular roll-calls and those whose names were called were deported to certain death. Once her name was also read, and while she ran into her room shouting «no, no, no», an old man shouted at the top of his voice here I am. This moment gave four decades to Ilka Gedő."

János Frank, whom I mentioned earlier writes this about the ghetto series: "No tragedies erupt in these drawings. No one should seek the passions reflected in Edward Munch's *The Scream*. There is nothing

melodramatic in the artist's presentation of suffering. A sense of constant, tense expectation pervades. Ilka Gedő's ghetto qualifies as a potential death row, and one cannot tell when Arrow Cross gangs will break in and indulge in a pogrom or when orders for a deportation to camp, or to the gas chambers, or to a walk to face a volley of fire at the Danube Quay will come." 22

Mother's drawings made in the ghetto were shown at several exhibitions here in Hungary and abroad. "Ilka Gedő's series drawn in the ghetto is unique in Hungarian art history. They are invaluable as documents, and much more than that: they go beyond the *Lagerkunst* that is morally valuable but aesthetically of secondary importance. These drawings are not simply reports on the infernal season: they have grown into allegories of human humiliation and defenselessness."23

Aunt Riza was born in Vienna. She married a rich Jewish-Hungarian lawyer at the end of the 1890s. She lost one of her sons during the War. When I got to know her in 1960, she was living in a huge flat with three and four sub-tenants--all of them very old widows. The reason why I visited Aunt Riza was to keep her a company to her and to practice my German. I was visiting the house for three years in a row. In the autumn of 1961, my parents asked aunt Riza to take care of me

22 János Frank in: Semjén Anita (ed): *Áldozatok és gyilkosok/ Gedő Ilka gettó-rajzai és Román György háborús bűnösök népbírósági tárgyalásán készített rajzai a budapesti Zsidó Múzeumban* (Victims and Perpetrators/Ilka Gedő's Ghetto Drawings and György Román's Drawings of the People' Court of War Criminals at the Budapest Jewish Museum), közreadta (published by): The Cultural Exchange Foundation, Budapest, 1995

23 *Gedő Ilka művészete (1921-1985) György Péter-Pataki Gábor, Szabó Júlia és Mészáros F. István tanulmányai /The Art of Ilka Gedő (1921-1985) Studies by Péter György-Gábor Pataki, Júlia Szabó and F. István Mészáros/ Budapest, 1997, Új Művészet Kiadó. p. 20.*

and I even lived there for a short while. Nevertheless neither Aunt Riza nor my mother told me that this was the house, this was the very apartment in which they spent the last seven months of the war.

My father and my mother got acquainted on New Year's Eve in 1945 in a villa on Ady Enre út which was then occupied by various artists including Endre Bálint²⁴, Júlia Vajda and József Jakovits. This was a deserted villa, and the "squatters" soon became the officially recognized tenants, although later on they had to move out. Júlia Vajda invited my father to this party, but there was nothing peculiar in that, since - through the mediation of his elder brother Gábor Bíró - my father, Endre Bíró belonged to this circle anyhow. Júlia also took along Ilka whom she knew from Szentendre. (OHA) My parents got married on August 19, 1946.

The following may be reconstructed from letters and father's short memo on the Gedő family. As a consequence of anti-Jewish measures, in mid-June 1944 the Gedő family had to vacate their flat under *Fillér utca 30* and move to *Erzsébet körút 26*, where they had lived together with Aunt Riza until January 18, 1945, the liberation of the Pest side of Budapest by the Red Army. The Gedő family could not immediately return to their home in *Fillér utca* because a person who had lost his flat in the bombings occupied it. Jewish families could not immediately

²⁴ Endre Bálint's (1914-1986) father, Aladár Bálint was a well-known art critic. Endre Bálint pursued studies at the Department of Graphics at School of Applied Arts. In 1934 he went to Paris. Having returned from Paris, he met Lajos Vajda, whose wonderful drawings filled him with admiration. In the summer of 1937, 1939 and 1940 he stayed in Szentendre, where he was in close contact with Lajos Vajda. He became a founding member of *Európai Iskola* (the European School) of painting. Between 1957-1962 he lived in Paris. From the time of his return, he had been taking part in Hungarian arts life. Until his death in 1986, he had more than forty exhibitions in Hungary. Bálint is a surrealist painter obsessed with memories, dreams. Some motifs recur on his paintings, and the colours project both sensual poetry and a great deal of anxiety.

go back to their homes, but they were obliged to agree with the victims of the bombing or the "victims of the bombings" to share the occupied flat until a better a solution could be found. The Gedő family did not, could not move back. When father and mother got acquainted, the Gedő family already lived under *Alsó-Erdősor 18* in a big and zigzagged flat together with Lenke Weisskopf (Mrs. Steiner) and her two children Erik and Júlia. Here comes the first strange thing. When the Gedő family finally got back their home in *Füller utca 30* only Ilka and her mother moved back, and Simon Gedő was left behind in *Alsó-Erdősor 18*.

When the Second World War started grandmother Elsa bought Napoleon gold coins from the money she had saved up during the many years where she had worked as an office clerk. As father mentions in his memo "either twelve or twenty-two". The difference between these two estimates is quite great. These gold pieces were saved from the ravages and plunders of the war, and they were regarded to be Ilka's dowry. Ilka sewed the coins into the back of a huge dictionary that was given to a greengrocer with whom the Gedő family was on friendly terms. The greengrocer was asked to safe-keep this book until after the siege of Budapest was over. After the siege Ilka went to get back the books, but instead of a shop she found only destruction. Among the rubble she discovered the dictionary whose pages were torn out. Apparently some Russian soldiers used it as toilet paper, but, sewn in the back of the dictionary, the gold coins had been well preserved.

Erik Steiner, the late Erwin Steiner's son, aged only 17, started to manage the small margarine factory and business went bust. With its ideology the state, which the Communists increasingly dominated, made its utmost to prevent the growth and development of these small factories. According to father's memo, there was a real threat of Erik being sent to prison, because he could not repay the company's debts. Elsa gave "the golden coins to Lenke without hesitation". The golden coins were not sold. They served as collateral for a loan from which the still existing liabilities of the then already liquidated company could be paid off. According to father's written recollections, when the Steiners wanted to repay the loan and wanted to get back the collateral, the

lender refused to give the golden coins back, saying that he had never received any collateral. Quote from father's memo: "In connection with the gold coins, there was a complicated settlement and clearing between Elsa and Lenke. Lenke gave some silver objects to Elsa and the Gedő family's stay under *Alsó-Erdő Fasor 18* was also taken into consideration. The two sisters regarded the debt as repaid "

In response to mother's two letters, in a letter probably dated the end of November 1979, Júlia Steiner writes as follows. " 1. Back then Elsa gave a quick financial help to Erik (Júlia Steiner's brother) and *the Steiner family* (original italics) meant to alleviate the financial burdens of the then already liquidated margarine workshop. The wages and severance pay of the dismissed workers had to be paid. The help (*the gold coins--D.B.*) given by Elsa was pawned by Erik and the conditions of getting back the pawned objects were agreed. However, the lender was a villain and did not keep his promise. 2. Erik's "stupidity" (*Júlia most probably repeats the word originally used by Mother--D.B.*) consisted in having blindly trusted the above-mentioned person. (He died ten years ago.) Everything had been agreed on just verbally, and, when the debtor wanted to repay the loan, the lender said everything had disappeared. 3. To Riza and Baba Erik never even mentioned these things. They never even guessed what happened. 4. At the same time, Mother's gold bracelet, Ignác Steiner's gold pocket clock chain and some earrings from Mrs. Ignác Steiner were also gone. (This is it. No other jewels were left.) 5. When it turned out that it was impossible to recover these objects, Lenke gave Elsa a valuable Persian carpet of purple color sized 2.5 square meters, plus another carpet. 6. When Lenke left Hungary, she gave two silver candlesticks and a set of cutlery as a partial compensation to Elsa. 7. «Lenke helped the old Gedő's». Yes, this was assistance falling under the category of debt repayment. That this is not a complete repayment is clear to me. "

The truth of the matter is that Ilka brought up this issue in her correspondence with her cousin, Júlia Steiner at the end of 1970's. This was rather inappropriate, since in the strict legal sense nothing could be proved any more, and these events took place 22 years before. At the time Ilka brought up the issue, both morally and legally all claims had become invalid. In another letter dated December 9,

1979 Júlia writes as follows: "My letter written to you a few weeks ago may have created the impression in you that I have the intention to exonerate Erik or want to distort the fact of plunder under the slogan of «Lenke helped the old Gedó's». This is not at all the case. The debt does exist, and we can say that some of it has been repaid. I would like to know what its exact amount is, and I will do my best to give the value back to you with which Elsa had helped us." Another letter dated June 28, 1981 Júlia points out: "You ask me how it was possible that I do not remember the exact amount. To tell you the truth, I remembered the sum only vaguely, I wanted you to give the exact figure. Once again on the essence, this is not a case of what you expect me to do, but what I regard as absolutely necessary morally. This debt does exist. I would rather bear all moral and other burden than talk to Erik about that." (At the time of writing these letters, Júlia had very difficult times. Her husband was dying of cancer and she had to look after her mother who was very old and ill.)

The debt has never been fully repaid. The tactic of let us talk away the issue as well as Júlia's insistence on not involving Erik worked out perfectly. Júlia emphasizes that an involvement of Erik in discussing the matter would have turned her life into a hell. In Júlia's correspondence around 1983-1984, the topic seems to have been dropped.

When mother died in 1985, Erik sent us 10,000 forints through a friend of his. My guess is this was meant to be funeral relief. I still remember the house I had to go to, located in downtown Budapest opposite the Hotel Intercontinental, under *Apáczai Csere János utca 1*, to get this money from an acquaintance of Erik. Back then in 1985 I felt so humiliated by Father's insistence that we have to accept this funeral relief. I thought there was something very fishy about this. Had I known about the disappearance of the gold coins back in 1985, I would have insisted that this "relief" (sending us the message that the Bíró family is a bunch of impossible people living in poverty) be never accepted. I will probably never know what really happened.

There is also a physical piece of evidence from Mother indicating how she felt about Erik. I found a letter from Erik written to the Bíró

family, dated February 22, 1975, both sides of which bear testimony to the fact that, driven by anger, Ilka may have ignited the letter and, immediately after it, extinguished the fire caused by the burning paper. Erik reports on how brutally Imi Endrei, Riza's son annihilated everything he found in his deceased mother's estate: "Ilka, I hope you have managed to save some items emotionally close to you from Imi's terrible destruction. Imi mentioned something about old photos of Elsa and letters that had been preserved by Riza. Imi mentioned that he had burned some of them and some had been handed over to you. To be sure, what is the purpose of talking too much about this? These are really olden times. If I take a closer look at the calendar, within a few days it will have been 25 years since I left Budapest. Maybe it is not even true that I lived there once, and neither is it true that since then I have been there on a visit once for three days."

After August 19, 1946 the newly-wed Ilka Gedő -Endre Bíró couple were given the Gedő parents' apartment at *Fillér utca 30*, and Elsa moved back to the Steiners. "At the time of Dani's birth on September 28, 1948, the old Gedő couple had already been living for a long time at *Szilágyi Erzsébet fasor 10* as sub-lodgers (father's recollections)." In 1953 my parents changed their property for a rented flat of much bigger size under *Baross utca 3*. (Grandmother Elsa wanted to have a key of her own to the flat, because she helped my parents by baby-sitting. My parents flatly refused this request, and a terrible row ensued.) "I must tell something about Elsa's death, " writes father. "She had an ugly death and she died deserted. There was an influenza epidemic, and she had to be hospitalized. She died the following day on February 7, 1954. Her heart was in a terrible condition. That is the reason why she died of a flue (father's written recollections)." I would like to remark that her heart giving in does not come as a surprise to me. After Elsa's death on February 7, 1954, Simon - aged 74 then - moved back to the Steiners. "It did not make sense for him to live with his sister-in-law for a longer time, so later he moved to us. ("Us" means my parents--D.B.'s note.)" However, Ilka was so much irritated by her father's presence that she sent her father to a boarding room into an inner city flat for a considerable amount of pay. "Simon had a very beautiful room; it was a very civilized place, but he got into the company of ridiculous and petty-bourgeois people, which is a strange

thing (*father's memo*).” Grandfather died on September 11, 1956. (According to his death certificate, his last place of residence was located at *Október 6. utca 24* in the Vth district of Budapest. On the back of the death certificate the following note is to be read: "The funeral relief has been disbursed.")

In 1945 my mother registered in the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts. In the resume of one of the Hungarian exhibitions one can read that she stopped her studies after the first semester for family reasons. What these family reasons could be, I can only guess. However, the most probable one might have been my parents' marriage itself which had a rather stormy start. In 1947 mother took part in the *Free National Exhibition* of the Fővárosi Képtár (*Municipal Gallery*).

If the fact that my parents' marriage did not break up is an indicator of marital success, then their marriage was successful because it did not end in divorce. However, my parents' marriage in the initial years was far from being happy. As indicated by Ilka's notes, the two were continuously quarrelling. This was the time when Ilka had to think through what it meant that she had stopped doing art.

On September 28, 1948 my elder brother, Dániel was born. Doubts began to torment mother concerning the possibility of a woman becoming a true artist. ("What might, what could the message of a woman artist be? Painting is a field all the traditions of which have been passed on by men from generation to generation from the times of the ancient Egyptians. Is it possible to take over from men their form of life, their craftsmanship and their attitude to the world? Impossible! This might result in taking over their genius.") These dilemmas, the start of Communist terror and Ilka's isolation within the Lajos Szabó circle made her stop doing art in 1949. Although Ilka knew already two artists (Júlia Vajda and Endre Bálint and cursorily also Lajos Vajda²⁵) who were in close contact with Lajos Szabó, she

²⁵ Lajos Vajda (1908-1941) was a painter and graphic artist. His art is justly regarded as the most valuable achievement of Hungarian avant-garde art. In his works a surrealist vision is blended with a rational composition. From 1930 to 1934 he lived in Paris,

was confronted with this intellectual circle only right after the war, when she got acquainted with father. In a study published in *The Art of Ilka Gedő (1921-1985)* the authors point out that the Jewish intellectuals belonging to this community chose a "left-wing radical" solution of assimilation through which they were able to break away both from the sense of being Jewish and from middle-class and nationalistic traditions. "By choosing this road they could attain the feeling of universality which was so important to them.²⁶"

In his recollections, Father, after speaking a lot about the constraints imposed by bourgeois propriety on behavior, mentions the cultural revolution of youth in the sixties, and, in connection with this, the circle of Lajos Szabó which he regards as a counter culture aimed at getting rid of the limits imposed by bourgeois propriety. This circle was a "subculture, indeed sometimes I feel the temptation to call it sect. But maybe this is an exaggeration. To be sure, the really talented members of the intelligentsia did find the ways whereby they could overcome the constraints of bourgeois morality without forming a sub-cultural community...." (OHA)

Based on the belligerent avant-garde attitude of the artists belonging to the circle, Ilka's drawings were branded by the members of the circle to be manifestations of emotional realism. Friends and artists belonging to the circle failed to realize that, from 1944 on, Ilka had left behind figuration and realism. In his *Recollections on the Artistic Career of Ilka Gedő* Father writes as follows: "These people interpreted modernity in quite a blurred way in terms of the notions of figurative and abstract art. It depended very much on personal likes and dislikes who was «forgiven» for making figurative paintings.") Mother's

where he was a close friend of Lajos Szabó. The French surrealists and the Russian avant-garde film had a decisive impact on his art. In the summer of 1935 and 1936 he stayed in Szentendre. In the autumn of 1940 he was called up for labour service, and died of tuberculosis on September 7, 1941.

²⁶ György Péter, Gábor Pataki etc.: op. cit. p 20.

self-portraits drawn in *Fillér utca* represent a style different from her earlier drawings, and art historians pointed out that they are reminiscent of Alberto Giacometti's works. At this time, Ilka did not know Giacometti, although in her estate I did find a book on Giacometti published in 1968. Mother resumed using pastel and "she visited Jenő Barcsay, a famous artist of the Szentendre School who liked my mother's drawings very much. Barcsay warned Ilka not to use colors, because he said Ilka did not have the slightest idea of what colors were all about. Ilka was so dejected that she came home weeping..." (OHA)

It was also at this time that her brother-in-law, Gábor Biró recommended to mother that she should attend a course on technical drawing and then take up a job. Gábor said that even during the course participants could earn some money. Not only did my mother refuse the offer, but asked Gábor why he was "ruining" his life by devoting it to something so boring as being an accountant. A terrible quarrel ensued. This reply was very much resented by Ilka's mother-in-law who called "Ilka a parasite who was not willing to help her husband in the struggle of life." (OHA) Thus, the already existing drift and resentment between the two Biró families became even wider.

In the autumn of 1949 Ilka Gedó's hand became uncertain, and while drawing a self-portrait, the last drawing of her first artistic period, her virtuoso lines became entangled, expressing her tormenting doubts. Father often mentioned that until then she had been drawing with the naturalness of breathing, and the naive spontaneity of her genius was gone forever. She stopped painting and continued her artistic activities after an intermission of sixteen years. Mother stopped drawing completely, and she was not even willing to draw something as part of some play activity. (When my brother asked mother to draw a drawing, she refused....) However, this did not mean that she gave up her keen interest in the arts in general. "Even after stopping artistic work, Ilka regarded herself an artist." (OHA)

After 1949 Ilka pursued extensive studies of art history and color theory. In addition to her mother tongue, Hungarian, she read German with ease, and she did not have difficulties in reading books in French

and English. To this very day a huge number of notebooks are preserved in the estate. All notebooks have dates on them. In September 1949 Ilka read Gino Severini's theory on painting. In 1962 she read and took notes of Herbert Read's *History of Modern Painting*. She did a thorough reading of Uhde-Bernays *Künstlerbriefe*. Probably in response to what she had heard in the circle of Lajos Szabó, she also read and translated most of Ferdinand Ebner's *Das Wort und die geistigen Realitäten* while Communist terror was raging in Hungary. In 1951 József Révai, the all-powerful cultural commissar of the Communist Party, declared that the "ultimate aim of national education is to inspire the people totally with the truth of the teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin." A textbook of English for Hungarian grammar school students published in 1955 had a lot of literary (Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift Charles Dickens) passages in it, but it also included typical Communist bullshitting, like: "Dear Comrade Rákosi/We proudly salute you on your sixty-first birthday and wish you abundant health and strength for many years to lead the brave Hungarian people (...) Since the day of its liberation by the glorious Soviet forces, the Hungarian people have advanced under your brilliant leadership with seven league steps." Just compare these texts with the ones mother was reading, and you realize these two worlds are as far from one another as continents. For example, here is a note-book entry made by my mother from Martin Buber's *I and Thou*: "Every great culture that embraces more than one people rests upon some original encounter, an event at the source when a response was made to a You, an essential act of the spirit."

These readings and a great amount of the notes preserved in the notebooks indicate that Ilka did not stop thinking about art at a time when an iron curtain descended on Eastern Europe and little or no information traveled across borders. Most of the notes are in Hungarian, which meant that mother translated many passages right away into Hungarian. However, many of the notes are also in the German, the English or the French original. Ilka made a complete translation of Goethe's color theory. She carefully mounted and preserved her drawings; in fact she devoted several years to this activity, indicating that she knew the real value of her drawings.

In 1947 and 1948 Ilka was given the opportunity to draw from models in one of the workshops of the Ganz Factory. Ilka was looking for models and my parents lived in the direct neighborhood of the factory. The Ganz factory, situated on *Margit körút* in Budapest, was a large enterprise, producing elements for electrical engineering in one plant, and metal parts for machines and tools in another plant. In the late 1940's after the war, it offered an educational program organized by a liberally minded engineer. Ilka was welcome on the premises to sit and draw, even though the result did not correspond to the official image of a worker. An exciting sequence of drawings was drawn in pencil and pastel. Some of Ilka Gedő's friends, belonging to a circle of artists naming itself *Európai Iskola* (European School) of painting, became suspicious believing that Ilka started to follow the official Communist arts policy line, and that was the reason why she drew pictures of the world of factory work. One look at these drawings is enough to see that this series is very far from idealizing the world of work. In fact, what we see in these pencil drawings and pastel color works is a depressing and awful sweat-shop with little light glimmering through the dirty window-panes, workers scrubbing off the rust from huge metal plates, machines which, in the artist's imagination, are just on the verge of falling in on the workers while turning into huge monsters. It is not by accident that these drawings are very much appreciated by viewers from England and America. I believe that for them they conjure up the worst days of the Industrial Revolution. When Ilka had an exhibition in Glasgow in 1985, the *The Times* carried a review showing one of these drawings.²⁷ The Ganz factory drawings were also shown at Shepherd Gallery²⁸ in New York City in 1995.

Another series shown also at Shepherd's is the Table series. In a letter to Ilka dated August 11, 1980 written by László Beke, a Hungarian

²⁷ John Russell Taylor in *The Times*, London, 29 October, 1985

²⁸ *Ilka Gedő (1921-1985) Drawings and Pastels* (November 21st December--December 29th, 1995), Shepherd Gallery (21 East 84th Street) New York, N.Y. 10028

historian of art, I discovered the following passage: "And now I return to the drawings... Any of the major drawing collections of the world should be glad to acquire them. I am fascinated by the Table series. These drawings are beautiful, subtle, tormenting, clumsy, pitiable, and fearful. The lines wither away at the end of the object; the top of the table seems heavy but it nevertheless seems to be floating about in space in such a pitiful and vulnerable manner, as people float about in the void."

Ilka was always obsessed with the real visual world, and did not want to follow the fashionable trends of contemporary art. She wanted to depict reality, although, as indicated by a letter dated August 10, 1949 written to Ernő Kállai²⁹, an excellent theorist of modern and abstract art in the inter-war period, she was tormented by doubts concerning the problem of figuration versus non-figuration. Perhaps trying to make her letter more forceful, Ilka does not bother to mention that the passage quoted in her letter is from the 1938 March issue of *Szép Szó*. However, she stops short of mentioning that the quoted passage is from a review written by Ernő Kállai himself of an exhibition of Hungarian abstract artists (Lajos Vajda, Jenő Gadányi and József Nemes Lampér). Ilka writes the following: "One day I discovered the following sentence in an old issue of *Szép Szó* (Beautiful Word): «The history of art proves that all art with a universal perspective is an ornamental art. This applies to the vision of medieval painting and sculpture in addition to all the objective representation they contain. There is a significant justification for the fact that modern symbolic art almost totally excludes representation.» My immediate reaction was to ask why does modern art exclude representation? Is it possible not to exclude objective representation? Could it be *in the guise of reality*? This question has been tormenting me for years. I know, of course, it is

²⁹ Ernő Kállai (1890-1954) was an art critic and writer on the visual arts. He worked in the British Museum and the National Gallery. He joined the Bauhaus movement, and became the editor of the journal *Bauhaus*. After his return to Hungary in 1935 he was the most important theoretician of avant-garde art in Hungary.

possible, but is it possible for us today, for me? (.....) Why does modern symbolic art exclude representation?" In his wise response Ernő Kállai writes as follows: "I would advise you to use your eyes and follow your heart. What I say is a bit banal, but wise. Don't take any notice of the clever know-alls and snobs to whom Van Gogh is an « outworn concept» and according to whom you have to go by Picasso's abstract art. All aesthetic dogma and direct programs of development are a lot of hot air. There is no way to salvation in art where every road leads to Rome and where there are many kinds of green forests. (...)
/Kind regards, Ernő Kállai"

My parents regularly visited the already mentioned circle of young and mostly Jewish intellectuals, led by Lajos Szabó. Members of this circle appreciated the art of Lajos Vajda very high. (Mother knew about Lajos Vajda. From her letter addressed to Ernő Kállai one can infer that she saw the Lajos Vajda memorial exhibition which was mounted in 1943 in the *Alkotás Művészetek Háza*. In fact, in her letter written to Ernő Kállai, mother quotes from the catalog text of the exhibition written by Ernő Kállai.) Some members of the circle (including Stefánia Mándy) even separated Lajos Vajda's art from the whole of 20th-century modern art saying that the Lajos Vajda was a saint, and adopted the view that among visual artists his oeuvre is the only and true manifestation of genuine religious feeling, whereas modern art did not reach the lofty religious and spiritual levels attained by Vajda. While recognizing Vajda's greatness, Ilka wrote an essay in 1952.³⁰ She did not like the idea that some Budapest intellectuals should rank artists according to the degree of their religiousness. This essay is interesting not only because it takes issue with the view according to which artists should be evaluated in terms of their religiousness, but also because it deals with the issue of figuration versus non figuration in a way that already suggests that Ilka's future return to doing visual arts would be something completely different from what she produced earlier. Stefánia Mándy's writing attacks Endre Bálint for fleeing into the world

³⁰ This essay was published in Hungarian in the Hungarian literary monthly *Holmi*. Ilka Gedő: Vajda Lajosról (On Lajos Vajda) *Holmi*, 1990/12, pp. 1343-1354

of instincts, and failing to speak to "the second person". (This is a reference to Ferdinand Ebner's and maybe Martin Buber's notion of Thou). Endre Bálint wrote a response. He responded to the attack with a counter attack. Ilka was also highly critical of the views voiced in Stefánia Mándy's essay. "I wrote my response after reading both Endre Bálint's and Stefánia Mándy's writings. The problems discussed in this letter were absolutely important to me. They were issues of life and death to me. As I progressed in the essay, I gradually forgot about the origins of the dispute." (Mother in a letter dated March 4, 1982 to Júlia Szabó.)

This is what my mother writes: "How should we consider ourselves more sensitive, more *righteous* than Klee, Picasso or Miro, or if you will, saying that we have ties to the certain *second person* whereas they did not. I know it for sure, as if I were both persons myself that Klee was not a trace more indecent than Van Gogh. I am not saying «indecent» as a joke, because that is what it finally comes down to; whether they see that which they confess, or whether they are lying. (...) Artists, painters are not Christ who redeems the world. (...) In characterizing the negative style you speak first of the inability to address. For now, I can say that without the ability to address not one Klee or Bálint picture could have been born. (...)." Then, once again tackling the issues raised in her letter to Ernő Kállai, Mother criticizes those self-declared geniuses who always declare "We do not depict, we create." First she quotes Piet Mondrian from a book I found in her estate.³¹ Mondrian writes that non-figurative art shows that "art" is not the expression of the appearance of reality such as we see it, nor of the life which we live, but that it is the expression of the true reality and true life. Ilka asks the question: "Could it be that «this true reality and true life» once coincided with the reality in which we live?" Ilka also quotes Paul Klee from the same volume: "I want to be as though new-born, knowing nothing, absolutely nothing about Europe; ignoring poets and fashions, to be almost primitive. Then I want to do something very modest; to work out by myself a tiny motive, one that my pencil will be able to hold without any technique. One favorable

³¹ *Artists on Art*, New York, Kegan Paul, 1947, p. 428.

moment is enough. The little thing is easily and concisely set down. It's already done! It was a tiny but real affair, and someday, through the repetition of such small but original deeds, there will come one work upon which I can really build." ³²

This passage is crucial to understanding Ilka's paintings. These works were prepared based on what one might call a double-step method. First a small drawing was drawn at the spur of the moment. This preliminary draft might be understood as the visual depiction of a flash of thought and it proved to be the basis for the oil painting, since an enlarged version of the drawing was copied onto the canvas. For this purpose a grid was drawn both on the canvas and on the preliminary drawing. Ilka was working on several paintings simultaneously, and this might have been the reason for preparing a notebook for each painting. These notebooks record and monitor the making of the given painting and are full of speculations on colors. Ilka was fully aware of the effect of colors and color tones. She was not mixing colors in a random way, she knew colors inside out, and, once she decided what she wanted, she prepared the color needed. Different color tones were put into different boxes; boxes for all blues, all green, all reds etc. The colors were painted on small pieces of paper, and served as a sort of reminder. Color reminders are to be found also in the notebooks. Ilka was painting in the corner of a room overlooking *Üllõi út* which was the best-lit room of our three-room apartment. She was sitting on a low chair in front of the easel and speculating sometimes for hours what the next step should be. Making the painting was a speculative process; it was a game of chess. Several paintings were being painted simultaneously. When resuming any of the paintings, mother carefully re-read the relevant diary.

My mother was preoccupied with Eastern art as well as the differences between Eastern and Western figurative art. In one of her notebooks the following notes can be found translated from an unidentified German art historian: "There is a decisive difference between the Eastern and the Western concepts of what is regarded a picture. Although the European artist is also a creator, what he creates is not

³² Ibid, pp. 442-443

his self, but an image of something. (...) The Eastern artist creates just a framework that is finished and/or re-created by the viewer in a conscious manner. The ancestor of the European artist is Prometheus, the rival of God, who stole the fire but could not become one with it. The European artist is a man obsessed with power. He wants to create. (...) Following ancient human tradition, in Eastern art it is not regarded an ambition or madness if man becomes one with God, and the divine becomes human. In the East it is not a blasphemy to become one with God. It is not madness. Indeed, it is the only natural objective." Various series were painted: a rose garden series, an artificial flower series, a circus series. In an article on Ilka Gedő Júlia Szabó (one of Hungary's best art historians who discovered Ilka and paved the way for her first major exhibition in Hungary) writes the following on the artificial flower series: "When Ilka started to work again, she concentrated on landscapes as interpreted by painters of the Far East: plants are not ornaments or patches of color, they are living beings, and pictures are not living nature, but only its essence or counterfeit. Hence she called her series of oil pastels of the 1960s and 1970s an artificial flower series. The colors are real and dream-like at the same time."³³ What emerged from under Ilka's hand are fantastic canvases with an unprecedented color world, preserving a world in a translucent surface activity. If the maturest pictures are very well lit, one sees an organic visual texture as fresh as raw meat. The color texture is often so rich and so transparent that you could select any part of the picture and you could still have the impression that this selected part in itself could be a painting and image on its own.

In the modern and post-modern age an attitude of "anything goes" prevails. In such a world Mother's paintings may count as something unique. What can one do with a Hungarian painter painting something very similar to what Miro did, the other painting something like Cézanne, the third one doing something reminiscent of Chagall? I have the impression that Péter György and Gábor Pataki are accurate in their assessment: "Ilka Gedő is one of the solitary masters of

³³ Júlia Szabó: 'Ilka Gedő's Paintings' (A Retrospective)
The New Hungarian Quarterly, Winter 1987, p. 189.

Hungarian art. She is bound to neither the avant-garde nor the traditional trends. Her unique creative method makes it impossible to compare her lifework even to formally similar examples in art history."

34

In 1962 the Hungarian National Gallery acquired three of Mother's drawings shown at the Jubilee Exhibition of the Group of Socialist Artists. According to my father's recollections, my parents' friends often said how sorry they were over Ilka's stopping artistic work. Also father's aunt, the painter Gráber Margit visited us and saw the drawings. "Once Endre Bálint dropped in, just as mother was putting her drawings into order. He had never seen the drawings before, and he was fascinated by them." (OHA). My mother's first exhibition after the war was a studio exhibition showing her drawings made between 1945-1948. Endre Bálint opened it on May 15, 1965. The studio was our flat. Two of the three big rooms were selected. It is not clear to me why Endre Bálint helped my mother since later on I heard my parents scolding Bálint a great deal, as they believed (probably not without any reason) that Bálint, by relying on his connections to the Communist Party, was blocking my mother's career. I often heard from my parents that once of Bálint had been a friend of György Aczél, the number one functionary in cultural affairs under the Communist system. I believe my parents were ungrateful to Endre Bálint, since, by organizing this exhibition, he probably gave mother the impetus and the then badly needed encouragement for resuming her artistic work. (Dr. Alajos Dornbach, a lawyer and a very old friend of my parents whom I met quite recently, recapitulated his memories: He remembered hearing Bálint as he was talking over the phone with Aczél, the Communist Goebbels, and indulging in scolding the system. Yes, this was typical of Bálint. He wanted to look both a victim of the regime, but he did not resist very much when it came to getting the highest artistic awards from the Communist power holders.)

34 [Gedő Ilka művészete \(1921-1985\) György Péter-Pataki Gábor, Szabó Júlia és Mészáros F. István tanulmányai /The Art of Ilka Gedő \(1921-1985\) Studies by Péter György-Gábor Pataki, Júlia Szabó and F. István Mészáros/ Budapest, 1997, Új Művészet Kiadó. p. 19.](#)

Mother said that the contradiction between having organized this initial exhibition and Bálint's blocking her artistic career is only a semblance, since back in 1965 Bálint's real intention was to confront my mother with the fact that her art was all over. It was all over, and, once and for all, it was a thing of the past. I liked the studio exhibition very much indeed. I was thirteen then. Finally, there was a room in which I could run around unimpeded and I also liked the drawings.

One day as I returned home from school, I could greet Endre Bálint, my mother and my father selecting the drawings. The guest was offered a cup of tea, and started joking: why don't they produce mugs with the handle inside, it would really be a pleasure to drink tea that way. The illustrious guest asked for a pair of scissors, and she immediately got one whose edges were blunt. "Ain't there a normal pair of scissors in this flat," asked Bálint. In an era where the Communists controlled every aspect of life, one had to have a great measure of courage to organize such a studio exhibition. To my great surprise there were not signs of harassment or misgivings on the part of the authorities.

After the exhibition my mother got a huge desk and started to carefully select and mount her drawings. Ilka never went to work outside the family. But whatever work she did in connection with her art, she did it with devotion and perseverance. In 1969-1970 Mother and Father went to Paris for a year. We were not allowed to go with them because the authorities feared we might never return. Refusing to return to Hungary and staying in the West was a crime then, and the "perpetrators" were allowed to return and to visit Hungary only after a lapse of a five-year period, after which immunity was granted for this "crime". Ilka took part in a group exhibition at the *Galerie Lambert* in Paris. (Some years ago as I mentioned this to an acquaintance from Germany, I was surprised to hear that he knew about this gallery, and he said it was not just one of many galleries of Paris, but a very well-known one.) My father got a state-sponsored scholarship that was supplemented by another one-year scholarship of a considerable amount. My parents lived very well during this time. They rented a

small studio flat very close to the Boulevard St. Michell and a few hundred yards from the Jardin de Luxembourg.

In the wake of a resolution of the Hungarian Communist Party, the regime loosened somewhat its grip on artistic life in 1972. It started to regard "socialist realism" not only as a naturalist style, but one including several styles. Western art was no longer so clearly condemned. This was the first time the Communist power holders seemed to realize that most modern Western artists are opposed to the traditional conservative values of bourgeois society, whereas it was just socialist realism which did not transcend the traditional styles. "One must bear in mind that while in Western Europe discussions centered on issues relating to art that actually existed, in Hungary many decades were wasted on the pointless discussion as to «what art should be like»". 35

What did official art policy look like? On top of it all was the cultural committee of the Party's Central Committee which directed the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry, in turn, directed the Arts Lectorate, the *single* organ in Hungary that was authorised to issue permits for holding exhibitions. According to official Communist art policies, there were three types of art: "art to be supported, art to be tolerated, and art to be banned". Only artists having good contacts with the Communists, especially with the group of György Aczél, the all-powerful head of cultural affairs at the Party's Central Committee and his colleagues, got permits for exhibitions and commissions. (In the case of Bálint, his temporary emigration was not very much resented. All are equal, but there are some that are more equal than the others. In the period from 1962 till 1984 Endre Bálint had forty-three exhibitions in Hungary. Bálint left this country after 1956 and returned to Hungary in 1962.) Although the Kádár regime (1956-1989) indulged in projecting a liberal image, many artists, including Ilka Gedő, were practically blacklisted for a very long time. Only after several refusals did my mother become a member of the Hungarian

35 Péter György-Gábor Pataki: *Official Arts Policies in Hungary (1945-1985) /unpublished study/*

Artists' Association in 1974. She had her first official exhibition in 1980 at the age of 59.

From a memo prepared by father and carefully preserved by me, the following may be learnt. At the beginning of December 1978 Lenke Haulish, a senior staff member of the National Gallery indicated the museum's intention to mount an Ilka Gedő exhibition. In January 1979 Bálint told father on the phone that he was going to have an exhibition in the Workshop Series of the National Gallery. A week later Gallery staff (Mária Anka) indicated they wanted to come and see Ilka's works. Ms. Anka mentioned that they also visited Endre Bálint, who praised Ilka very much and proposed that he would want to "help". On April 27, 1979 Ms. Vajna and Ms. Anka selected the drawings. On leaving, Ms. Vanka had inadvertently mentioned that Bálint asked her to report on the preparations for the Ilka Gedő exhibition. Father also mentions that on May 29, 1979 he got a phone call from Bálint. First they talked of kings and cabbages, and then father asked if Bálint knew that Ms. Vajna from the Gallery had visited the Biros. "Yes I do," answered Bálint. "She came to my studio most recently. And to tell you the truth, she got frightened a bit. You know, Ilka's art is something without antecedents. Somewhat surrealistic, a little reminiscent of the Art Nouveau style. All in all, she is a little afraid of mounting this exhibition immediately in the Gallery. So she thinks it would be more appropriate to try a "house of culture" first. (These were small-sized cultural and community centers most often with precious little significance.) Most recently, the National Gallery is backing such endeavors." Father answered that he believed this was not suitable for Ilka. Bálint blurted out the reply: "I myself had exhibitions at such places." Anyway, father answered that that was back at the beginning of the 1960's. The memo prepared by Father, also mentions that at the end of the conversation Bálint tried to explain how much he wanted to help Ilka, how much he tried, and tried to explain that Ilka... etc. On March 4, 1982 my mother received a letter (signed by Zsuzsa Jobbágyi) from the National Gallery of Hungary informing her that "your exhibition to be organized in the workshop series of the Hungarian National Gallery has been included into this year's plan." In the end, this exhibition never took place.

The reason why I told this story is that I often heard Mother and Father talk about Endre Bálint preventing my mother's exhibitions. As I mentioned earlier, Bálint was a very a well-connected person. He was a close friend of the chief "commissar" of culture of the Communist regime, György Aczél, and - probably spurred by jealousy - he did an awful lot of harm to Mother. I heard this on several occasions from my parents. Whether this was true or not, I just cannot tell. However, I do remember my parents talking about Bálint's latest intrigues. This was a recurring topic in our family. But maybe my father was more exact when he said, "*Bálint could have helped Ilka more and done less harm to her.*" (OHA). I think this was a very clever and balanced judgment, since Bálint also helped a lot. (He organized mother's studio exhibition that gave Ilka a great impetus in her artistic career. Botond Kocsis, an amateur, but very enthusiastic art historian, saw a drawing by my mother at Bálint's flat. He liked the drawing so much that he contacted the Bíró family, and, later on, he called Júlia Szabó's attention to Mother's works. Júlia Szabó is a very influential art historian and the fact that Mother had her first major show in Hungary in 1980 is mostly attributable to her.) However, if I may believe my parents, Endre Bálint also did a lot of harm to my mother.

Mother's first major retrospective was shown in 1980 at Szt. István Király Múzeum (*St. King Stephen's Museum*) of Székesfehérvár, Hungary. She was 59 years old then. I had the impression that this was a turning point in Ilka's life. This was the first time she started to guess that her art ought to deserve even greater recognition. This is a typical case of rising expectations: until someone is oppressed and his real merits are not appreciated he can tackle the situation. However, when the oppressor gives in, and the victim gets a glimpse of what he could really become if he were free, or treated in a fair way, the situation escalates and becomes intolerable for the victim. In the last five years of her life Ilka grew increasingly dissatisfied and disappointed. She always felt the real break-through was very far, and having never shown the system how much she was "fascinated" by Communism and for lack of good connections, her road to real success has always been blocked.

I remember my parents talking about politics pretty much indeed. They always condemned Stalinism and the Soviet system. They always criticized its special Hungarian brand of Communism, the so-called suave dictatorship prevailing in Hungary from about the mid-1960's till 1989. Never did they have the slightest doubt that the regime was corrupt. They always knew that it would come to an end. When? No one knew, and no one dared to predict. All we knew was that it would have to come to an end some day. When? Nobody dared to say. My parents brought back a book in French from Paris written by the Russian author and historian Andrei Amalrik. He spent five years in a labor camp in Siberia and wrote a book titled *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* Amalrik was forced into emigration, because the secret police followed him constantly, detained him, and threatened him with arrest and murder. I remember Father saying half in joke, half in earnest: "Will Amalrik Survive Until 1984?" Well, he did not, he died in 1980 in a car accident in Spain.

In 1982 Ilka mounted an exhibition of her recent work at *Dorottya Utcai Galéria*, Budapest, and the Hungarian National Gallery bought two of her oil paintings. In 1983 Ilka informally appointed me to be the steward of her estate. "Ilka was absolutely clear on not allowing Dani to become the custodian of her estate. She saw Dani's carelessness and laxity in administering his daily jobs." (OHA).

Just as the staff was preparing the permanent modern exhibition of the Székesfehérvár *St Stephen's Museum* Yekaterina (Kate) Young and Chris Carrell, two art historians from the U.K. visited the museum and they caught sight of two of Mother's drawings. (Kate was originally born in Rusinko, a geographical region of the historical Hungary, an area that now belongs to the Ukraine. This area always had a very mixed population of Hungarians, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Russians, Romanians and Jews.) I think her mother tongue was Russian but she knew several other languages including Hungarian.

Kate and Chris wanted to visit us and see mother's work, but at the Ministry of Culture a senior staff member lied to them, and told them that my mother was in the countryside. It was another painter, Ilona Keserű who told Mrs. Young and Mr. Carrell that this was not the

case. So Kate and Chris came to our home, met Ilka, and saw much of the estate. That is how preparations for the first Glasgow exhibition got started.

Sometime in April in 1985 I came home at about three o'clock and father and mother were not at home, which was quite unusual, because they usually met at the university's canteen, had lunch there and came home together. At about 5 o'clock father came home and told me mother had been hospitalized for high blood pressure. He said I should not worry very much, since this condition can be treated very well by the administration of drugs. Mother got well within a few days, and a thorough medical check-up followed in the course of which it turned out that she was terminally ill. She had lung cancer.

During the last days of May 1985 mother's condition got very bad. Ilka Gedő, a Hungarian woman artist aged 64 was dying of lung cancer. I knew she was dying, my brother and my father knew she was dying, in fact everyone around knew what was going to happen and Ilka herself knew that the end was very near.

At the beginning of June 1985, Ilka Gedő got a letter dated May 28, 1985 sent directly to the hospital from Júlia Szabó a well-known Hungarian historian of art who was one of the art historians who recognized her talent. A quote from the letter: "Ilka, please, please recover from your illness. During my stay abroad, I visited a number of museums, and I remembered your drawings and paintings. You are a great master of European art! Once the museum of Székesfehérvár is finished, everyone can go there, see your works, and see for themselves that this is true. I also have other plans. It would be very good if we had a Museum of Modern Hungarian Art here in Budapest. I have a simple, but functional and well-lit building in mind with white walls, door to door carpets, air-conditioning and nearly nothing in the museum's store rooms. I saw quite a few museums like that in Germany. I wish a museum like this were blown to Budapest through some magic. That is what I am dreaming about. And perhaps this plan of mine is also backed up by someone else's plans." What is very troubling to me in this letter is that Júlia Szabó specifically mentions

in this letter that her family has a holiday cottage in Budakeszi, but she nevertheless does not have any time to visit Ilka.

Another "lovely" gesture from this period is that the Bíró family got a message from the Hungarian Arts Fund informing Ilka that permission was granted to her to use one of their holiday houses at the famous Szentendre arts colony. Mother filed her request with the Arts Fund in February of 1985. This is a very fashionable and accepted social game here in Hungary. If the gossip of the town indicates that a neglected famous artist, writer or scientist is dying, someone is sure to come up with the idea of giving the dying man a reward, thereby offending the victim even more. *And this is it.* Revenge or, for that matter, a huge trick on someone else is for many wicked people one of the sweetest things in this country. Malicious joy (*Schadenfreude*) over someone else's misfortune has become an ingrained behavioral attitude for people living in this country. In fact, it is one of the worst character traits of Hungarians. (In this context Hungarian means both Jews and non-Jews.)

Around mid-May mother was transferred to a hospital in *Budakeszi*, a village on the outskirts of Budapest. At the very same time Chris and Kate came to our home and they were viewing mother's works for days. They came in the morning and left late in the afternoon. "Carrel says: « I went for an hour, was completely bowled over by what I saw in the piles of portfolios and spent days there.»"³⁶ Ilka's condition got worse and worse, and on June 15 she went into a coma. She died on June 19, 1985.

At mother's graveside on June 25, 1985 Rabbi István Berger read from the Book of Job conjuring up, as it were, Ilka Gedó's personality and work: "Can the wing of the ostrich be compared/ with the plumage of the stork or falcon?/ She leaves her eggs on the ground, with only earth to warm them;/ Forgetting that a foot may tread on them/or a wild beast may crush them." This passage continues: "Yet if she bestirs herself to use her height, she can make fools of a horse and rider too."

³⁶ *Studio International*, Vol 199. No 10-12/1986, p. 59

4. Mother's Road to Fame

Ten days after mother's death, her exhibition at the Gallery of the Artist' Colony of Szentendre was opened. Mother's first exhibition was due to open on October 5, 1985 in Glasgow as a part of the Hungarian Arts Season. Chris Carrell and Kate Young were so much fascinated by mother's art that Ilka's works were not a part of the group exhibition at Third Eye Centre but they were shown separately in the nearby Compass Gallery on 178 West Regent Street.

Father wanted to be at the opening. First he went by train to Brussels, where he planned to make a short stopover because she wanted to meet an old friend from Budapest, Magdi Kotányi. Magdi Kotányi divorced one of father's best friends Attila Kotányi, remarried, and was living with her husband in Belgium. Father was hospitalized in Brussels. His life was in grave danger, and after his condition had got "stable", he was released from hospital and came home by plane.

I met Father at the airport, and I was shocked. I saw an invalid, a broken man. It soon turned out, that in addition to high blood pressure for which father had been treated for many years then, he also had emphysema. In a year's time, father became an invalid confined to his bed most of the time and for staying alive he had to rely on oxygen which was delivered to our flat regularly in a huge oxygen tank.

The first Glasgow exhibition was a success. The British press liked the artists shown at *Hungarian Arts in Glasgow, 1985*. However, *all* the reviews carried by *The Glasgow Herald*, *The Scotsman*, *The Financial Times*, *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Observer* gave special treatment to Ilka' art. In the October 29, 1985 issue of *The Times* John Russel Taylor writes as follows: "The most remarkable and distinctive of all the artists shown is Ilka Gedő at the Compass Gallery. Sadly, she died in June, when the season was already in preparation: sadly, also, she is apparently quite unknown in Hungary. The show includes some of her remarkable ghetto drawings from the Second World War, as well a some of the highly idiosyncratic flower and

garden paintings of her last nine years, wayward yet tense scribbles, richly, delicately coloured, which oddly recall Mondrian's dying chrysanthemum. Fluttering on the edge of naive, these fragile works cast their spell, and one imagines that their Glasgow reputation (a major retrospective is planned) will soon ensure this prophet at least posthumous honor in her own country. "

In 1987 mother had a retrospective show at the Múcsarnok (*Palace of Exhibitions*) of Budapest, the biggest and most well known venue for showing modern Hungarian contemporary art. In 1989 her drawings were shown at the Szombathelyi Képtár, Hungary. Between December 9, 1989 and January 13, 1990 mother had a retrospective at Glasgow's *Third Eye Centre* (346-354 Sauchiehall Street). Unfortunately, the catalogue planned for the exhibition could not be printed for lack of financing. The show was good and it received an excellent press coverage. I had the opportunity of being present at the opening. During the first days young arts students from the nearby academy of arts came in groups and started to copy the drawings. I was quite surprised, but someone was quick to explain to me that this does happen when something very good is being shown. This major retrospective exhibition traced the development of Ilka's art from the vivacious childhood drawings to the small, delicate semi-abstract paintings of exquisite sensibility created in the last decade of her life. A review by Murdo Macdonald carried by the *Scotsman* remarks: "Gedő's work displays deep introversion but in a very positive sense. A typical subject of her drawing is a woman reading, head propped on her hand, and very often those she portrays seem to be enclosed in a world of their own thoughts. They are drawn in pencil in a way that, as many of Van Gogh's drawings, evokes straightforward physical reality and emotional sensitivity at the same time. "

I do not exactly remember how I got acquainted with János Gát. Maybe he just wrote me a letter. János Gát fled to Israel via Yugoslavia at the age 17, whence he went to Paris. He has had an extremely diverse career. In Paris he became a member of the "squat theatre", a Hungarian avant-garde theatre whose members left Hungary at the mid-seventies. After going to New York in the early 1980's, he ran an underground nightclub and wrote lyrics to several jazz and rock songs.

Some of these rock songs became hits. He started a gallery with the help of a Ruby Azrak, a rich Jewish factory owner living in New York City. János Gát published two books of poems, one in Hebrew and one in English. The English book of poems published in 1990 is titled *Riding My Camel Upright Through the Needle's Eye*.

Initially, János had a Gallery in New York City under 572 Fifth Avenue very close to the district of diamond dealers. The Ilka Gedő exhibition was open from March 1 to mid-April 1994. The April 1, 1994 issue of *Forward*, the number one Jewish weekly in America, carried a long and detailed article on the Gallery: "the Ilka Gedő retrospective is just the latest in Mr. Gát's efforts to bring to light a number of Hungary's leading avant-garde artists (both living and deceased) many of whom, owing to their Jewishness and their positions as political dissenters under the Communist regime, were never accorded formal acclaim." At the end of March 1994 I did not go to New York on my own. I took along Zsuzsanna, my elder daughter. (I will write about this later on.) What I regret very much is that I did not try out skating in Central Park at the feet of skyscrapers casting a shadow on the Central Park. I also liked the view of Manhattan from Roosevelt Island. I liked the majestic stream of traffic going down the avenues and the noise of hooting of cars drifted by the wind.

Two days before leaving New York, I went to the Jewish Museum and with some difficulty I managed to get an appointment immediately. I spoke with a junior curator, Susan Chewlove and called her attention to mother's exhibition at János Gát Gallery. Relying also on the help of János Gát, from April 18, 1995 four of Ilka's drawings were shown for a period of six months at the permanent exhibition *Culture and Continuity: the Jewish Journey* at the Jewish Museum of New York. These drawings were later on donated to the Museum.

I went to the János Gát Gallery several times, where I met Anita Semjén, a Hungarian woman living in America who got acquainted with Ilka Gedő's art at this exhibition. She was absolutely surprised at having not heard anything about my mother. The pictures she saw at János Gát Gallery overwhelmed her. Although she had organized a big show on modern Hungarian art in Washington a few years before, she

did not know anything about Ilka. She promised to mount an Ilk Gedó exhibition. In 1995 a wonderful exhibition curated by Anita Semjén *Victims and Perpetrators* showing mother's ghetto drawings and György Román's drawings done at the trials of the Hungarian war criminals was opened at the Budapest Jewish Museum.

The exhibition was opened by Árpád Göncz, the president of Hungary. I had the opportunity to shake hands with Mr. Göncz. Anita Semjén introduced me to the President saying, "And this is the artist's son." The President seemed to have a natural and easy-going style, but in some clever way he made me feel he did not want to talk with me. At the opening, I also met Miklós Hernádi, a sociologist and a novelist and then, most recently, an art expert covering Hungarian auctions and art events in the Hungarian press. Miklós Hernádi was also my friend some six years earlier with whom had day-long conversations. Here in Hungary nobody thinks a situation of a conflict of interest has arisen when the very same person who covers art events has a huge private collection and he himself is an active arts collectors. Mr. Hernádi, the art critic having a beautiful house on the outskirts of Budapest, asked for a free catalogue which, I the polite guy and the artist's son, quickly presented to him. "Well, David, I will try to write something on her," he promised to me. I was not really aware of the fact that he reported only on auctions, and I thought at once why does he have "to try." Is it so hard to write a report on this event? Why does he try to write *something*, instead of writing a normal report without trying to do so? "By the way, David, I will write more on Ilka's art if I can buy the painting we spoke about for less than you mentioned, but even then I would like to pay the reduced price only later," Miklós said. "We'll see," I said, thinking to myself this is crazy. This guy was trying to blackmail me. He, the well-connected arts writer was trying to peddle his writing an article on Ilka Gedó, in other words, his good connections for works of art.

In September 1994 János Gát took along his friend, Robert Kashey, the owner of Shepherd Gallery to our apartment. Mr. Kashey liked the drawings so much, that he offered he would mount an exhibition showing the table series and the Ganz factory drawings. The exhibition was open between November 21 and December 19, 1995. Robert

Kashey whose costs were paid for by my brother and me also printed a wonderful catalogue on that occasion.

Extended by three oil paintings of both Gedő and Román, the exhibition *Victims and Perpetrators*³⁷ formerly shown in Budapest was also shown at Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Museum. Ilka Gedő's ghetto drawings came into the possession of Yad Vashem.

In 1997 a book titled *The Art of Ilka Gedő (1921-1985)*³⁸ was published including studies by the Hungarian art historians, Péter György, Gábor Pataki, Júlia Szabó and F. István Mészáros. The story of this book is rather interesting. I was very happy when this book was published, for various reasons. I thought it was very good that the color reproductions were of excellent quality. The book was originally planned for the 1989 Glasgow exhibition. The studies were translated into English. At the beginning of 1995, I handed over for Gábor Pataki the Hungarian and the English versions of these studies plus a study by F. István Mészáros that I translated into English to Gábor Pataki. I prepared a detailed bibliography and a resume of mother's biographical data and a list of the artist's solo and group exhibitions.

On handing over these materials to the book's editor, Gábor Pataki, I emphasized that the texts had not been edited yet, and the English translation had not yet been revised. I asked Mr. Pataki to tell me if

³⁷ Semjén Anita (ed): *Áldozatok és gyilkosok/ Gedő Ilka gettó-rajzai és Román György háborús bűnösök népbírósági tárgyalásán készített rajzai a budapesti Zsidó Múzeumban* (Victims and Perpetrators/Ilka Gedő's Ghetto Drawings and György Román's Drawings of the People' Court of War Criminals at the Budapest Jewish Museum), közreadta (published by): The Cultural Exchange Foundation, Budapest, 1995

³⁸ *Gedő Ilka művészete (1921-1985) György Péter-Pataki Gábor, Szabó Júlia és Mészáros F. István tanulmányai /The Art of Ilka Gedő (1921-1985) Studies by Péter György-Gábor Pataki, Júlia Szabó and F. István Mészáros/ Budapest, Új Művészet Kiadó*

they cannot arrange for the translations to be revised by a native speaker. Mr. Pataki told me that he would see to it that the texts are revised. Ten months later I got the printed texts and I was shocked to see that Mr. Pataki did not do anything with the text. He just gave it to the printer without having corrected either the Hungarian or English manuscripts. After lots of begging I got a permission to have the texts revised. The language revision was done by Kate Montgomery, an American colleague of mine, who was copy editor and a language teacher at Ernst & Young, Budapest. There were lots of corrections and the footnotes were a mess. Thanks to God, I could rely on my experience of having worked for a publishing house for twelve years. After lots of disputes and wrangling, the book was finally published. I checked the proofs several times approving the final version. In spite of this, soon after the book's publication I was compelled to write a letter to both the book's editor and the head of the publishing house *Új Művészet*. In the Hungarian version of the listing of "Works in Public Collections" The Jewish Museum New York was changed into Jewish Museum, Jerusalem and in the English translation of the same text The Jewish Museum, New York was deleted. To me both of these "corrections" were consistent in that they were aimed at hiding the fact that Ilka Gedő's drawings are to be found in the Jewish Museum in New York. My letters were never answered. I found it very disappointing that such a trick was allowed to happen. What is even more insulting is that no one from the publishing house, not even the book's editor, have ever bothered to apologize for this mistake. Nevertheless, it is a very good thing that this book exists, and it has already been sent to several museums and libraries including the library collection of MoMA in New York City and the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. I understand the book has been completely sold out now.

In the summer of 1998 I met Péter György and Gábor Pataki in the National Gallery and Péter walked up to me and asked me: "Do you know that your New York commission agent, János Gát is a dope peddling heroin addict?" "No," I replied. "Anyhow, thank you for having warned me." Then I recommended that we should meet to discuss things concerning the Ilka Gedő estate, my impressions on the book etc. "Sure," he said. "That would be a wonderful idea." Never did we

meet again. I wrote to him, I phoned him, I left messages, but none of these have been answered. The strange thing is that György Péter is a publicist and a professor of media theories at Budapest's ELTE University who relentlessly criticizes Hungarian conditions, championing the cause of integrity and bourgeois decency. However, his behavior indicates that he is not willing to govern himself according to these principles. I will never learn what is happening behind the scenes in connection with Ilka Gedő.

I have sent this beautiful book on Mother to several people who have shown an interest in mother's art. One of them was Maurice Tempelsman who bought a drawing by Ilka Gedő which was on commission at the Shepherd Gallery. (Mr. Tempelsman turned out to be identical with the person written about in the May 30, 1994 issue of *Newsweek* (p. 15.) devoted to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis (1929-1994): "For the last 15 years, her steady companion was Maurice Tempelsman, a wealthy diamond trader with a comforting manner and an easy sense of humor.") In a letter dated January 28, 1998 Mr. Tempelsman responded to me as follows: "Dear Mr. Biro: Thank you very much for your note of January 11, 1998 which was forwarded to me. I very much appreciate your sending me the book on Ilka Gedő. What a wonderful artist and what a touching story./ Sincerely, Maurice Tempelsman"

On July 10, 1997, I wrote a letter to Kirk Varnedoe, the MoMA's chief curator of painting and sculpture in which I sent 16 slides and I wrote among other things, "What do you think I and my brother should do in the long run with this estate given the fact that there are about 100 paintings plus about 1,000 drawings in my possession? My number one priority concerning the Ilka Gedő estate is to achieve the objective of having her work exhibited in various internationally known museums." In his letter of September 8, 1997 Kirk Varnedoe responded the following: "Museum policy forbids me making any comments regarding works of art in private hands, and equally giving any advice regarding possible commercial affiliations." On November 17, 1997, as a gesture of goodwill, I sent Mr. Varnedoe a copy of the book on Mother adding, "I think I understand now why as a matter of policy museum policy forbids you to give any comments on works of

art in private hands." I also mentioned that I would very much appreciate some of the works by my mother to be included in a group exhibition, even though I knew the "likelihood of that is very slight." I concluded my letter by saying that "I would be very much honored if you wanted to acquire a few of her drawings as a donation." This letter was never answered.

On December 19, 1997, I sent another letter to Mr. Varnedoe informing him that a website on Ilka Gedó could be visited at www.adam.hu/gedo. This letter was not answered either. On January 23, 1998, I sent a letter to Margit Rowell, the curator of the Department of Drawings offering a few drawings as a donation to MoMA. Enclosed in the letter I sent two copies of the recently published bilingual book on Ilka Gedó --adding that the recipient might wish to deposit one of them in MoMA's library. I also sent a catalogue of the exhibition titled *Victims and Perpetrators* and twenty slides of drawings. On March 18, 1998, I spoke with Ms. Rachel Warner's secretary at the Department of Drawings explaining the situation to her. I told her quite openly that the reason why I could not turn with my questions to Hungarian museums that had exhibited my late mother's work was simple. None of Hungary's museums intends to organize a representative permanent exhibition showing Hungarian painters between 1945 and 1989. This is an outrageous and rather regrettable situation, since I believe that some of the artists (including my mother) should get international acclaim. None of Hungary's museums helps save estates. Their position is that these estates should be given to them free so that they can be put into moist cellars, where they will surely rot in a few years. Giving aid to help restore artistic works is out of the question. The Hungarian National Gallery has 7,000 works from this period but only some fifty of them are on permanent display. I emphasized that my mother was a victim of the former Communist regime. Since the collapse of the Communist regime, the same old arts policy preferences prevail. It is very American to hold oneself responsible for one's own fate and not to complain. This is fair enough if the rules of the game are just. Unfortunately, however, this was *not* the case under Communism. I cannot rectify past injustices and the humiliation my mother suffered at the hands of the rulers of the former regime.

On March 19, 1998, I got the following response from Rachel Warner: "I have spoken with Margit Rowell regarding our phone conversation. Ms. Rowell has informed me that your materials are being circulated among the Drawing's curatorial staff for review and consideration. You will get a final response from our senior curator, Magdalena Dabrowski who is on vacation until March 30."

Magdalena Dabrowski must have returned from her vacation earlier because accompanying a letter dated March 20, 1998 refusing my request, she sent back everything. "We are grateful to have had the opportunity to view the work of Ilka Gedó. However, at this time we do not foresee any exhibitions in which the work could be included, nor do we feel that we can make an acquisition. Enclosed please find your slides and visual material. If you have not already done so, we suggest that you may wish send this material to The Jewish Museum in New York as well." On July 2, 1998, I addressed a letter of complaint to Glenn D. Lowry, the Director of MoMA: "My offer of donation was refused by Magdalena Dabrowski. I am not happy about this but I accept this decision. However, not only did I make an offer, but I also sent two books on my mother. As shown by the MoMa Database (sic), which is accessible via the Internet, one of the books (*Victims and Perpetrators*) sent to Ms. Dabrowski is also available in MoMA's library. The other book is a bilingual (English and Hungarian) volume of three studies which, accompanied by 20 color and 18 black and white illustrations, gives a comprehensive picture of my mother's art. All materials (the two books plus slides and Xerox copies of drawings) were sent back by Ms. Dabrowski even though I offered the two books on my mother for MoMA's library. I find it outrageous that even the books on my mother were not accepted. My offer concerning the books was ignored, and the letter I received created the impression that I was asking for an exhibition which is not at all the case. / What is also outrageous is that all the materials (including the two books sent by me) were referred to in Ms. Dabrowski's reply as visual materials. The two books, (*Victims and Perpetrators* and *The Art of Ilka Gedó*) were thereby deprived of their book status. I also would like to mention that the first book, *Victims and Perpetrators* contains a series of drawings by my mother done in 1944 in the Budapest ghetto. This is a document

from the Hungarian Holocaust in which more than 600,000 Hungarian Jews were exterminated. / All in all, I was literally shattered by the handling of my offer by your staff members. It was not the refusal of my offer of donation that shattered me. Your museum was offered an opportunity that it refused. It was the whole attitude of your staff's handling of my offer which is problematic: 1. They pretended as if I had not offered the books for MoMA's library, and sent them back referring to them as "visual materials" thereby depriving them of their book status. 2. They pretended as if I had asked for an exhibition which is not at all the case. I only made an offer of donation. 3. Your staff's handling of my offer was both unfair and humiliating. Even my American friends, including Robert Kashey, a New York gallery owner, who mounted an exhibition of my mother's drawings with a wonderful catalogue, which was also sent back by Ms. Dabrowski, were outraged at the handling of my offer. "

I was waiting patiently, when on August 15, 1998 I received a letter from Deanna Caceres, the Executive Assistant to the Director: "Dear Mr. Bíró/I apologize for the delay in answering your letter of July 2 addressed to our Director, Glenn D. Lowry. Mr. Lowry has been traveling extensively throughout the summer, but he did receive your correspondence. Before responding to you, he would like to speak to Magdalena Dabrowski, the curator with whom you originally communicated. Unfortunately, Ms. Dabrowski is traveling until September 8. After they have spoken and Glenn understands the situation more fully, he will write to you directly. Again, I apologize for the delay and I thank you for your understanding with this matter."

I wrote back on the same day emphasizing once again my position: "1.) Never have I raised the idea of any of my mother's works to be included in any of your exhibitions. I just wanted to donate a few drawings to your museum. It is your right to accept or to refuse an offer of donation. I *respect* -- I repeat I *respect*, -- this right. 2.) *Victims and Perpetrators* containing my mother's drawings done in the Budapest Ghetto of 1944 sets a memory to the 600,000 victims of the Hungarian Holocaust. At the time this book was sent back, I had not yet known that this book was already in your library. In her letter Ms. Dabrowski did not tell me either. In spite of the international success

of these and of other drawings and paintings, you may decide not to accept them as a donation. The problem, the big problem is your having sent this book back, as if it were nothing. 3.) Having sent back the recently published book on my mother is also quite a problem. Even if you had thrown the two copies of the book on Ilka Gedő into trash, this would have been far better than sending them back. Sending this back means: this is nothing, and I *show* and *demonstrate* it to you that it is *nothing*. 4.) Two wonderful books plus 20 or so slides are not just a 'visual material'. “

Toward the end of September I got very angry with MoMA. I thought Director Lowry would keep his word and would finally write to me. Nevertheless I lost my patience and, accompanied by the following letter, I sent him a wonderful album on Hungarian visual arts in the first half of the 20th century. This is what I wrote on September 22, 1997: “For the attention of Glenn D. Lowry/ re.: Modern Hungarian Visual Art Exists! (The Kieselbach Collection Hungarian Painting 1900-1945)/ Dear Mr. Lowry/I am the person who wrote to you in connection with handling an offer of donation from Hungary. I wanted and still would like to donate to MoMA a few drawings by my mother, Ilka Gedő. When I am working hard on the Ilka Gedő estate, I am also working for quite a few other artists who just because they were unlucky enough to have been born in Hungary cannot be recognized internationally. I mean *genuine* recognition./ Enclosed to this letter, I am sending you a book on modern Hungarian art covering the period between 1900 and 1945. I have no connection with the Kieselbach collection, I just bought this book some six months ago for about the equivalent of roughly 300 dollars. No works from Ilka Gedő are included in it. This book is just one vivid *example* showing to you that modern Hungarian art exists./ The reason why I am sending the book to you is to try to show to you and to your colleagues that Hungarians are a *European* nation whose 20th-century visual art is as good as that of any other nations (including, of course, French painting)./ After inspecting the book, could you please hand it over to MoMA's library. This unique book is meant for MoMA's library. “

On re-reading my correspondence with MoMA and reading a lot about Western museums and Sotheby's auction prices I really got furious,

and in a wanton way, unable to resist the ease whereby you can send letters by e-mail, on September 29, 1998 I sent Deanna Caceres the following *very* impolite and rude letter: "This is what is on my mind, this is the way I feel: You can afford to spend nearly 1 billion dollars on the extension of your museum, and I am beseeching you to take me and my request seriously. I ask you to condescend and to accept five drawings by my mother as a donation. To any viewer of the drawings it could have become crystal clear that my mother's drawings and art are truly great. You cannot even consider the possibility of a truly great Hungarian artist. You are arrogant like hell! You on Eastern Europe! The only thing that counts to you are the French impressionists! You are not willing to think through why I made this offer. If you have ever asked I would have explained it to you!"

In the first week of October I got a letter from Magdalena Dabrowski, the Senior Curator of the Department of Drawings: "Thank you very much for your correspondence, both with the Museum director's office as well as the Department of Drawings./Please accept my sincere apologies for not writing sooner. I appreciate your bringing the estate of your mother, Ilka Gedö, to The Museum of Modern Art's attention and understand your concern and wish that this collection be preserved and exhibited in an appropriate forum. / The question you raised towards maintaining the estate and keeping the memory of your mother alive are certainly valid and important. As an institution The Museum of Modern Arts is dedicated to exhibiting a wide variety of facets within the context of modern art. However, as you can imagine, the exhibition schedule for the next five years leaves little room for movement, since we are embarking upon a museum expansion program which we hope to accomplish by 2004./ I am sorry that The Museum of Modern Art can be of no further assistance to you. As Mr. Varnedoe has mentioned in his correspondence with you, we cannot make any comments about works of art in private collections nor can we give you advice. Please accept our apologies./Sincerely, Magdalena Dabrowski/Cc: Glenn D. Lowry."

On October 7, 1998, I sent Magdalena the following reply: "Dear Ms. Dabrowski/In my earlier correspondence *with you* I made an offer of donation. Your letter of September 25, 1998 ignores this completely.

All I asked of your department is to accept a few drawings (4-5 drawings) as a donation. *Never ever have I asked for an exhibition.* 1. Why do you act as if I had asked for an exhibition? 2. Why did you not inform me whether the drawings offered have been submitted to a curatorial committee? 3. Instead, you just tucked everything into an envelope and sent "my materials" back to me? 4. Why is not there not even a trace of the fact that my offer donation has gone through the curatorial procedure?/You have not clarified anything, even though there is a "Cc. Glenn D. Lowry" note at the end of your letter. I sent a complaint to your boss, because I think your attitude to my offer of donation is not correct. Please concentrate on the issue and inform me whether my offer of donation has gone through the official curatorial procedure. *I am still not satisfied with the way you are handling my offer.*/There are two options now: 1. You show me that there has been a curatorial decision on my offer. Surely there must be some trace, some evidence of your decision that you do not want to acquire drawings by my mother as a donation. 2. If my offer of donation has not gone through the official censorship procedure, you had better admit you made a mistake, and we should start the procedure once again, i.e. my sending another material for viewing. A copy of this communication will be sent to Mr Glenn D. Lowry. "

On the same day, still being angry, I sent the following message to director Lowry: "Dear Mr. Lowry:/I am very glad that the book I sent to you some two weeks ago has safely arrived. I hope you will like it. Enclosed to this letter I send you the letter which was originally sent to you with the book on the Kieselbach collection³⁹. In the meantime I received Ms. Dabrowski's letter of refusal. Thank you. In contrast to her earlier refusal, this letter uses a civilized tone. My current message is my private letter, even though I try to lobby in it for Hungarian art./Mr. Lowry, I am so frustrated that you do not want to do anything for modern Hungarian Art which is so good. You can afford to extend your museum for one billion dollars, but you are not in the position to accept five drawings from an internationally recognized artist, Ilka

³⁹ *The Kieselbach Collection (Hungarian Painting 1900-1945), Budapest, 1996*

Gedő. Maybe you still have the book on her. /Did you hear about the Salgo Trust Foundation? They published a wonderful book titled *Two Centuries of Hungarian Painters (1820-1970)*.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, I cannot send this book to you. I like it so much, that I am not willing to part with it. But maybe MOMA's library has this book. If interested in Hungarian art, please turn to them. /If you looked at the last image in the Kieselbach collection, you would find a drawing by Lajos Vajda who is at least as good an artist as Klee./ 1. In Hungary there is no single representative museum of Modern Hungarian Art. 2. As a result modern Hungarian art is not visible and known. 3. The Hungarian government does not want to support the cause of making modern Hungarian art known. This is the legacy of the Communist past and inertia. 4. The true worth of modern Hungarian art is not known. 5. Hungarian art is ridiculously cheap. 6. In five years' time foreigners will have bought everything up for ridiculously low prices.

If there were a truly famous Western museum that would identify with modern Hungarian art, then this process could be slowed down and even reversed. We have been an occupied country for forty-five years. Major Western museums have a moral duty in promoting Hungarian art in the first place because it deserves this due to its EXCELLENT quality and because we have been an occupied country for forty-five years, a Communist dictatorship. We can overcome our past only if we get some support from you. "

Reconsidering my earlier correspondence, on October 9, 1998 I sent the following e-mail message to Deanna Caceres, the Executive Assistant to the Director of The Museum of Modern Art: "Dear Ms. Caceres/I am awfully sorry for the somewhat harsh tone of my last communication with you./I just read an article about a person who donated 2,200 items to MoMA."⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Two Centuries of Hungarian Painters (1820-1970)*, the American University Press, Washington D.C., 1991

⁴¹ ARTnews, September issue of 1998. p.34.

On October 12, 1998, I called up Deanna Caceres, telling him how sorry I was for my angry letters. Do you guess what her answer was? Well, I wrote her answer down as soon as I had heard it: "An answer is going to be sent to you soon, " said Deanna in a very friendly tone. Then, switching into a very rude tone, suggesting that she and MOMA are capable of teaching me a lesson, she said: "I am not going to have any further communication with you." Without saying a word, I hung up, and I got so angry that on October 27, 1998 I wrote a short report on my correspondence with MoMA and sent it to John Rockwell, the editor of the arts and leisure section of the New York Times. They never even reacted to my article, but sending them this report may not have been in vain, because maybe under the slogan of let bygones be bygones I got a letter dated December 1, 1998 from MoMA's director, Glenn D. Lowry: "I have received your letters of October 7 addressed to Magdalena Dabrowski and to my attention. Before responding to them, Ms. Dabrowski and I have reviewed the entire correspondence with you going back to your initial letter to Mr. Varnedoe of July 5, 1997, and we discussed the matter in depth. I also took note of your numerous e-mails and telephone calls to my office and your conversations with my assistants. / I would like to explain to you that all the curators of the Museum of Modern Art take proposed offers of artwork very seriously. They review them individually and then discuss them together before an answer is sent out. They are also aware of the importance the art of Eastern European countries carries for the development of 20th century art, emphasizing its depth and breadth./We appreciate your efforts regarding the placement of your mother's work to the Museum's collection. However, having studied the materials you sent us, our curators felt that it would be *inappropriate* (italics added by David Biró) to add your mother's works to the Museum's collection. There are many skilled and talented artists whose works are offered to the Museum every day, and we are simply unable to accept all offers. We feel that it would be unfair to make an artist's work part of the Museum collection, only to keep it in storage, never to be put on view. As you must realize, only a very small percentage of the collection is actually on view as a result of the limited size of our galleries...." I think so much is enough of this letter, which finishes by telling me that the MoMA really cares about the art of Central Europe, since they organize a workshop for museum

professionals coming from the region: "I do hope that this letter has also illustrated to you the Museum's support of our Eastern European colleagues and our sensitivity toward their art communities./Sincerely, Glenn. D. Lowry." In my interpretation the last sentence wants to make the impression that MoMA, having an *international* collection of modern art, does not need to acquire anything from Central Europe: their collection is so damned good that it is enough for them to explain to the art historians of Eastern Europe what they should do with their art. So far, so good.

As of writing these lines, mother's works are to be found in the following public collections: the Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, Szt. István Király Múzeum (St. King Stephen's Museum), Székesfehérvár, Hungary, Szombathely Gallery, Szombathely, Hungary, the Jewish Museum, Budapest, the Jewish Museum, New York, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, the Department of Prints and Drawings of the the British Museum and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, and the Düsseldorf Kunstmuseum.

The acquisitions of the Department of Prints and Drawings of the he British Museum and the Israel Museum originate from works donated by me. As a part of the shipping arrangements to these museums, I had to obtain export permits from the National Gallery of Hungary. On examining the permit it turned out that each of the drawings were valued at 5,000 Ft which at the exchange rate of that date equalled 25 dollars. Seeing these values I felt as if I had been punished. I got an official certification from the National Gallery of Hungary that one master drawing by Ilka was worth 25 dollars. This value was in sharp contrast to the actual sales prices for Ilka's drawings ranging between 800 to 2,500 US dollars. Having received such low estimates is either attributable to ignorance by professional staff or to malice. The sad truth is that the latter is more probable. This is what may have happened. Gallery staff saw the purpose of the export permit and they decided to do harm by giving low estimates, since Ilka Gedő was a blacklisted painter anyway. (I often had the experience that in Hungary compliance with the law is looked on with suspicion and astonishment by the authorities since it is so much uncommon that someone is willing to obey the law.)

5. My Father, Endre Biró (1919-1988)

Endre Biró was born on April 19, 1919 as the son of Lipót Biró and Emma Gráber into a very liberal-minded family. My father's parents left their religion and converted to Christianity. They became members of the Unitarian Church during the era of white terror out of fear. The red terror of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic was followed by era of the white terror.

Father lost his father at the age of 12. He always spoke of his father with great love. He often mentioned how Grandfather took him for a ride on a horse-drawn tram on Margaret Island, one of Budapest's best parks.

Father was educated and raised with his cousins, János Surányi and Péter Surányi, the sons of a country physician. The Surányi children lived in the countryside in a village in Northern Hungary and they were only one year younger than my father was. Father stayed with the Surányis during the summer holidays, and the Surányis stayed with the Birós because they went to the same grammar school as my father did. Father had an excellent chemistry teacher who was very popular with his pupils. At the age of 14, father set up a chemistry lab at home, and as he was doing an experiment, one of the cooking cups exploded in his hands and the whole stuff got into his eyes. His mother was frightened, as my father ran out of his room yelling, "I can see." "I can see." (OHA). My uncle, who was as talented as my father, could not go to university because at the time when he finished grammar school, Lipót Biró, my grandfather died. My widowed grandmother could not afford to send Gábor to university. However, my father studied physics and chemistry at the Miklós Horthy (now Albert Szent-Györgyi) University of Szeged. It could not have been easy for him to go to university, since the numerus clausus law, or Act XXV of 1920 stipulated that Jewish admissions to universities and other institutions of higher learning have to be reduced to six percent of all entrants. The seeds of hatred between our and my uncle's family were sown. Father went to university, my uncle, Gábor did not for family reasons.

At university, father became known as a very smart and intelligent student. He was the one who could explain parts of the curriculum that the others were not so sure about. In order to avoid paying high tuition fees, father had to attain a given number of credit points. Since he was very good at maths, he took up optional maths subjects which served as a reserve in case he did not perform so well on the mandatory subjects. After having finished university, father did not even try to look for a job due to the anti-Jewish laws.

The first anti Jewish Act of 1938 was aimed at reducing to 20 percent the proportion of Jews in the professions, and in finance, commerce and industrial enterprises employing more than ten persons. The Act provided for the establishment of special chambers, and Jews could not constitute more than 20 percent of the membership. The second anti Jewish Act went into force on May 4, 1939. According to this Act, any person or anyone whose parents or two of whose grandparents belonged to the Jewish communities on or prior to the promulgation of the Act were to be regarded Jews. This Act prohibited Jews from obtaining Hungarian citizenship; restricted the political rights of Jews; it set a six percent limit in the professions; Jews were not allowed to become editors, editors-in-chief of publications and newspapers; firms with fewer than five employees were allowed to employ one Jew only. The third anti Jewish Act prohibited marriage and extramarital sex between Jews and non-Jews. By 1940 the number of Jews affected by anti-Jewish legislation in Hungary to the extent of being deprived of their livelihood was about 224,000.⁴²

During the war, father always thought that the Germans would finally lose the war. However, when Germany defeated France, he had a nightmare. For a short while he thought that the Germans could win the war. When he thought through the implications of this, he became absolutely frightened and started to ask himself what sort of a world that would be. (OHA)

⁴² W.S. Faber: *Hungary's Alibi*, London, 1944, p. 31

In May 1943 father was drafted into labor service. Draft-aged Hungarian Jewish men were used as auxiliary troops of the Hungarian army. They were not allowed to bear arms, and towards the end of the war they were not allowed to wear military uniforms. The members of the company were dressed in civilian clothes, but they wore army caps. First my father's company went to *Szeged*, then to *Pustaszer* where they worked in a hospital for horses, where my father learned how to groom horses. Old run-down horses were brought there, and after a period of being well fed and well groomed, they were taken back to the war front. The company was moved from *Pusztaszer* to Transsylvania and then to Budapest, whence they were moved to *Alsóvisó* a village in *Máramaros* county, a border county located in Northern Transsylvania of the then enlarged Hungary. According to statistics quoted by Randolph Braham 78,000 Jews lived in Ruthenia, and their number in *Alsóvisó* was 514.⁴³ This was the region where the greatest number of Orthodox and Hassidic Jews were living. Braham also mentions that the Jews of *Felsővisó* were transferred to *Alsóvisó* for entrainment. *Alsóvisó* was a point of departure of deportation.

It took several days for my father's company to get to *Alsóvisó*, and by the time the company had got there, it turned out that no one knew why they came. On the way to *Alsóvisó*, father saw a deportation train whose passengers were allowed to queue up for drinking water. "I still feel the shame for having swallowed the official propaganda according to which Jews had to be resettled from the border area. I thought this was a terrible shock to those affected. I added though that the war would be over soon anyway." (OHA)

In this regard, it is worth referring to some of the findings of a historian concerning the destruction of the Jewry living outside Budapest: ".The fact remains that the Hungarian Jews were not informed, even though Rezső Kasztner and others who possessed

⁴³ Randolph Braham: *The Politics of Genocide; The Holocaust in Hungary*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 150., p. 598.

Certificates of Immunity were able to travel to various parts of the country, where the measures for rounding up local Jews were already in progress. (.....) The overwhelming proportion of the Jewish losses occurred in the period of deportations, while the secret of their eventual destination was suppressed. Had the facts about Auschwitz been made known as soon as they were reported at the end of April, and had Horthy been subject to the same pressures as happened in July, the majority of Hungarian Jewry, even if subjected to progroms, thuggery, persecutions and humiliations of the Hungarian fascists, would never have perished."⁴⁴

At this point I cannot help mentioning that in 1998 a memorial plaque of Rezső Kasztner was put on the entrance of an elegant house in *Váci utca* one of the most elegant and fashionable streets in downtown Budapest (*Váci utca 12*): "This is the house Rezső Kasztner (1906-1957) lived in at the time of the Holocaust. As one of the heads of the Budapest Jewish Relief and Saving Committee, he saved the lives of many persecuted people by risking his life.--The Kasztner Memorial Committee/1998" It is not my task to decide the debate surrounding the rather controversial figure of Kasztner. However, I feel bitterness over the fact that this memorial plaque exists. When I pass by *Váci utca 12*, I immediately see this memorial plaque, and I think of the victims, and my heart sinks. What sort of country is Hungary, where a memorial can be erected for such a controversial figure?

"*Alsóvisó* was a small village whose Jewish population were peasants. These Jews have been deported, and the Company was ordered to take up quarters in the empty houses of deported Jews. (.....) I remember we had debates whether it was or was not morally appropriate to take along some of the bed sheets. There were also discussions about whether these Jews would or would not ever come back. The company was sitting on banks of a small river. (...) We had beautiful spring weather, and, far in the distance, I could see the snow-capped

⁴⁴ *The Tragedy of Hungarian Jewry*, ed by Randolph Braham, Social Science Monographs, Boulder, 1986, p. 33., p. 36.

mountains." (OHA) Within a few days the company was moved to *Dés*, where they worked for MÁV, the Hungarian State Railway Company. They worked at several places in Transsylvania. Once they were ordered back to Budapest for a time. "We were working at the sorting railway depot of *Rákos* and we were loading mixed cargo. (....) We had to sort cargo by the various destinations. On a day someone saw two huge sacks with the inscription 'Human Hair' addressed to a textile factory in *Győr*. (...) We punctured the sacks and we could see that the contents were really human hair." (OHA)

The company was ordered back to Transsylvania (*Magyarpalatka, Székelyfalva*) where it slowly disintegrated due to desertions. A letter dated November 24, 1981 written by György Zádor to my father testifies as follows: "We served in the same labor service company no. 705/1 from mid-May 1943 till October 15, 1944. As far as I can remember, you deserted the company at the time of the take-over by the Hungarian fascists at the village named *Csákiborgó* in the vicinity of *Dés*." Endre Bíró spent a few weeks in a Romanian mountain village, whence he wanted to go to a village named *Galgó*. Father was taken prisoner of war, and he was being marched by the Soviets for days. As they passed through Hungarian villages, peasant women came and tried to give the soldiers some food. On such an occasion, a Soviet soldier shot an alarm shot that hit father. The bullet went through his thigh. Father was hospitalized in a village named *Külhalom* whence he escaped with the help of the hospital director who said: "You will soon be released from hospital. I ought to hand you over to the gendarmarie and then you are to testify that you were not a soldier and then you will be released. But... if you want to escape, I give you some money for the train." (OHA) My father first went to Brassó and then to Bucharest, where he received help from the JOINT. He lived for several months in Bucharest before returning to Hungary. "Yes, we received some help from the JOINT. There were many Jewish refugees in Bucharest. When we received the money, we lived like kings for a while. Once the aid had been spent, we went to a canteen, where free meal was distributed." (OHA) Sixty-eight percent of Budapest Jews

aged 20-40 serving in labor service died, whereas in the age group 40-60 this ratio was 57 percent.⁴⁵

After the war my paternal grandmother did not want to return to the flat she rented before. As mentioned already, homes owned or rented by Jews had to be vacated and handed over to non-Jews, preferably to the victims of Allied bombings. Property that could not be taken along by relocated Jews was allowed to be stored in one room of the flat. Mrs. Lipót Bíró had the right to go back to her flat but she bought herself a flat under *Visegrádi utca 17* from a few jewels one of her late husband's friends has safekept until after the end of the war.

In 1946 47,124 Jews lived in the countryside and 96,500 in Budapest. According to estimates, approximately one-third of these 143,624 Jewish-Hungarians emigrated to Israel, and out of the remaining 100,000 Jews only twenty percent retained contact with their religious communities. However, abandoning the Jewish faith was not coupled with a conversion to Christianity. After the war, Communist terror suppressed all possible group identities including a Jewish identity, too. Not even the word Jew was allowed to be printed. Instead, when writing on the events of the war, journalists were expected to use the word "persecuted people". In the worst years of Stalinist terror, the Communists deported the "class enemies" of the regime to the countryside. "Thirty percent of all the deportees in the Stalinist period, 20,000 people were Jews."⁴⁶ Jewish small businesses were nationalized and confiscated by the state. The Jewish middle class suffered terrible losses. Following Stalin's call for an "intensification of class struggle", the regime became even more ruthless in dealing with its alleged enemies. Even Communists suddenly found themselves accused of horrendous crimes, of being former German agents or

⁴⁵ Randolph Braham: *The Politics of Genocide; The Holocaust in Hungary*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 150., p. 598.

⁴⁶ Randolph Braham (ed.): *The Holocaust in Hungary Forty Years After*, New York, Columbia University press, 1985, p. 215

fascists The Jewish victims of the show trials were often accused of being Zionist secret agents. In a country of 10 million inhabitants the secret police kept records on over a million citizens, and had 300,000 informers.

Many Jews wanted to overcome the burden of the past by identifying themselves with the goals of the new regime. Compared to their ratio in the total of Hungary's population, Jews were over-represented in the Communist Party. This should not come as a surprise, since the defeat of Nazi Germany and the fall of the Horthy regime meant fundamentally different things for Jews and for non-Jews. For Jews it meant that they were no longer threatened with physical destruction. Many Jews embraced the Communist ideology because they felt this was a means of assimilation. Almost everybody was a Jew at the top levels of the Communist Party in the first Stalinist period of Communism between 1948-1956. After 1956, however, there was only one Jewish member among the topmost members of party leadership. He was György Aczél, the all powerful commissar of cultural affairs. However, once these people became members of the power elite, they had to abandon all Jewish identities. In a study written in 1948 dealing with the Jewish question, István Bibó points out that: "The Jews of Hungary, do not constitute a united Jewish power block, due to the disparate nature of their social positions." He also adds that "regardless of how many persons of Jewish descent may be in this or that position, it is entirely uncertain whether this means anything, when it comes to given Jewish interests, Jewish solidarity or Jewish complaints.." 47

Father was already living in Budapest when he saw a report in one of the papers informing its readers that Albert Szent-Györgyi planned to come to Budapest to start a research institute.

Albert Szent-Györgyi was awarded the Nobel Prize for the discovery of Vitamin C in 1937. His researches were in biological oxidation. Later

47 István Bibó: "The Jewish Question in Hungary After 1944 " In: *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination*, Boulder, Colorado

on, his studies were on muscle chemistry. During the Second World War Szent-Györgyi became involved in the new foreign policy line as a part of which Hungary's peace feelers reached out toward the United States and England. By 1942 it had become clear that Germany would lose the war, and the Hungarian ruling classes hoped that, instead of the Soviets, Hungary would be occupied by the Anglo-American forces. This is what Mihály Kállay, the premier of Hungary between March 9, 1942 and March 19, 1944 wrote on Professor Szent-Györgyi describing in a very tactful way, how, unknowingly, Albert Szent-Györgyi walked into the trap set for him by the German secret services: "Unlike the other persons named, Professor Szent-Györgyi had received no commission from me. Before his departure, I discussed my policy with him, and I consented to his seeking contact with the Allies in order to enlighten them on our standpoint; but I entrusted him with no mission to enter into negotiations with them. I have the greatest respect for master scientists, but they are specialists only in their own field, and then, too, politics is not an exact science. I was not surprised when upon his return Szent-Györgyi talked of his far-reaching negotiations, for I had already received confidential reports from Constantinople which told me that his negotiations had been conducted with members of the German secret service."⁴⁸

In a letter dated April 9, 1945 and written to Albert Szent-Györgyi, *father* wrote that, as long as he had enough to eat, he was utterly indifferent to salary figures: "I apologize for the immodesty of writing you this letter without knowing you personally. Since the days I was a university student at Szeged I have known your free spirit, which has encouraged me to write to you by ignoring the usual forms./As indicated by the enclosed resume, even earlier the reason for my going to university was my intention to devote myself to pure scientific research. I felt I had a scholarly aptitude. However, in the previous regime, due to circumstances beyond my control, I was not able to achieve much in scientific research. I am firmly committed to my decision of dealing with pure scientific research, although I am aware

⁴⁸ Nicholas Kállay: *Hungarian Premier*, Greenwood Press Publishers, 1970, p. 181.

that being a scientist does not mean a high salary." The only thing that counted for father was to get an opportunity to do scientific research.

The great Nobel laureate professor received Endre Biró. Sitting in bathing pants, Szent-Györgyi was sunbathing on the roof terrace of what is now the university building in *Puskin utca*. (OHA) After a conversation lasting for about half an hour, my father got a job offer. It goes without saying, that he accepted and became a junior research assistant. After the war there was a chronic shortage of food, and Szent-Györgyi did not want his colleagues to be concerned about how to get food as this would distract their attention from research. He employed someone whose task was to travel around the countryside to get food. The institute had a kitchen of its own and the team used to dine together with the boss at a big table. Staff members were allowed to take home some of the cooked meals. (OHA).

Albert Szent-Györgyi and his team including my father attended the 6th International Congress of Experimental Cytology lasting from July 10 till July 17, 1947 in Stockholm. Most of the team did not return to Hungary but went to America. Father met Albert Szent-Györgyi the next time twenty-five years later in 1972 in America, in Cold Spring Harbor.

The February 20, 1970 issue of *The New York Times* reports that a book by dr. Albert Szent-Györgyi titled *The Crazy Ape* had been published by Philosophical Library Inc. of New York: "With wars, pollution and overpopulation, the Hungarian born scientist, who was wounded and decorated for bravery in World War I, holds sa very slim hope for the species on the tiny globe on which it must live. (...) Man's chances of survival are dropping toward 50 per cent, and by the end of the century will be below that. (...) There is one factor that makes a new beginning very difficult. The human brain freezes up for new ideas at a certain age, around forty."

But let us get back to 1947. Father reports on the Congress of Experimental Cytology in unpublished manuscript, probably meant to be a newspaper article as follows: "With the exception of Germany and

Japan, scientists from all over the world have been invited to the 6th International Congress of Experimental Cytology. More than four hundred participants attended the event. The organisers did their best to make participation easier for the delegates of those nations that have to grapple with post-war difficulties. Many of the scientists who are committed to the supra-national unity of sciences regretted very much that scientists from Russia could not come to the Congress. From among the small nations of Europe, Hungary sent the most populous delegation. We may say without any national bias that one of the most celebrated events of the Conference was Professor Albert Szent-Györgyi's lecture. (...) The electron microscope was undoubtedly one of the stars of the Conference. Many of the lectures dealt with the marvelous instrument and the spectacular new world that can be explored through its help. The electron microscope is the champion of magnification. It shows objects in a magnification that is 10,000 times bigger than the original. This means that if a walking stick could be magnified, which is quite an unlikely event, it would be the size of the highest mountain on Earth. To be sure, what one sees in the vision field of the electron microscope is not a walking stick, but at the most one or two cells. From all this we may guess what an exceedingly refined technology is called for in the preparation of an object for microscopic study. The electron microscope shows us a spectacular world hitherto unknown for us. Under it even viruses become visible to us. Viruses, these mysterious small beings, smaller than the cells, multiply within the cells, and they can become crystallized in the same way as lifeless material can. Today the debate on whether viruses are living things or not is a thing of the past. Instead of definitions, their closer exploration is on the agenda. It can be clearly seen on Prof. R. Eychkoff's photographs how these tiny viruses, having a peculiar form of their own, multiply. At a later point in time, the viruses have grown full-size in the ruins of the bacteria and have gobbled up their masters completely. (...) Professor Albert Szent-Györgyi's lecture reflected the triumph of comprehensive research concepts. Based on an extensive theory, it gave a clear review of all our knowledge on the functioning of the muscle. Used to doing research in small areas of detail only, researchers listened with enthusiasm to this comprehensive lecture. Although there were inexhaustible debates on specific issues, everybody agreed that Prof. Albert Szent-Györgyi's work is the first

attempt at explaining the functioning of the muscle based on precise physical and chemical terms. "

In his audio-recorded recollections, father remembered as follows. "One of my colleagues who was the only Communist party member at the institute drew me aside and told me that Szent-Györgyi had wonderful plans which ought to be implemented. First, I did not quite understand what this sort of speech delivered by my colleague was all about, and only later did it dawn on me that my colleague knew that the Prof was preparing for emigration and had already recommended his research colleagues to various institutions." (OHA)

The new head of the Institute of Medical Chemistry of Budapest Medical University was Brunó F. Straub. Most of the former Szent-Györgyi team emigrated. By 1953 father was the only person left. The Institute of Medical Chemistry was gradually transformed into an institution whose number one priority was university instruction. This was a major change indeed, since in the times of Albert Szent-Györgyi the institute focused primarily on research; "it was a caterpillar which did some teaching only with its hindmost leg" (OHA)

In 1953 my father was offered the opportunity to start a research group of biochemistry at the Faculty of Science of ELTE University. One of his colleagues writes as follows: "I started my career as a fresh university graduate at the Medical Chemistry Institute in 1950. Mátyás Rákosi, who was officially referred to as «best disciple of Stalin », had already instituted a reign of terror in the country, and the waves of the terror started to reach the Hungarian Academy of Sciences as well as the universities, including the Medical Chemistry Institute, at this time. Endre Bíró hardly survived the shameful times of 1944, and now he had to face another crisis. Colleagues who had a similar career benefited a great deal from the «new order» and thus became willy-nilly the tools of terror. Endre Bíró stayed aloof from this «solution» (....) Endre Bíró led an exemplary life. He respected science very much indeed, and he never treated it as a means for his career. Due to his modesty, he was pushed to the background in an unfair way.... A professor heading an institute does not always have time for the junior research assistants. However, Zebi (as father was nicknamed for short)

was always available when needed. We had a maxim: « Don't worry, Zebi will explain it!» " /Dezső Prágay ("a colleague from olden times" in the March 1989 issue of *Biokémia* (Biochemistry)/

In 1955 father wrote and defended his Ph.D. dissertation. At the very beginning father had one fresh university graduate, Béla Nagy who left Hungary in 1956, and started a career in America. Béla Nagy was replaced by András Mühlrad who joined the research "group" which had just one small office and two labs. András Mühlrad emigrated to Israel in 1973. Under the leadership of Endre Biró and András Mühlrad a high number of university graduates prepared their theses at this institute. The small research group was absolutely committed to both research and tuition, because they were aware that in the end it was untenable for a science faculty of a university not to have a separate department of biochemistry. Father started to name his team research group of biochemistry. In 1966 he got the title of "doctor of biological sciences". The small research group became an independent department of biochemistry in 1968. Father was appointed university professor in 1969. The department could move to new premises located under *Puskin utca 3*. The main focus of the research group, later of the department of biochemistry was muscle research, specifically, the contraction mechanisms of muscle. Father was professor of biochemistry until 1985, when he handed over the actual management of the department to his successor.

Endre Biró may have learnt management skills and a very effective leadership style from Albert Szent-Györgyi, and he was "the founding father" of the research institute of biochemistry. He alone decided on the hiring of new research staff. This proved to be absolutely crucial for the dynamic development of the department of biochemistry. All my father's colleagues were originally his disciples, and that is the reason why the department could retain its uniform profile. "I had enormous luck. I did not just receive new staff members, I selected and reared them." (OHA). "I have never known a researcher who was so much exempt from vanity or narrow-minded personal ambition. He was always ready to help his students and colleagues with good advice. His broad knowledge transcended not only biochemistry but also the social sciences. His contact with people was characterized by the fact

that he naively always assumed the best of all the people he came into contact with. Therefore, he hardly had any enemies. This is something rare in science where so much moral frailty can be observed even amongst the best researchers." /András Mühlrad in the March 1989 issue of *Biokémia* (Biochemistry) /

Father's focus was by no means limited to the natural sciences. He was also deeply influenced by the circle of Lajos Szabó that has already been mentioned in connection with Ilka. Born in 1902 Lajos Szabó, an intellectual guru had some new disciples from each generation. Endre got acquainted with him through his brother, Gábor Biró who was by seven years his senior. The circle of Lajos Szabó was by no means an organization with formalized rules. This was a company of friends and an open school with a multi-disciplinary approach, as my father put it "it was a multi disciplinary research community" Father often mentioned the study written by Lajos Szabó titled *Bible and Romanticism*. He liked this study because by setting up a hierarchy of the various forms of knowledge it emphasized that "the really hot point in production is basic research" (OHA). Endre himself acknowledges that he wrote a small book for secondary-school pupils on the pharmaceutical industry in whose general introduction he heavily relied on Lajos Szabó's ideas concerning the hierarchy of the various types of research.

Father was impressed by the personality of Lajos Szabó. Very often, especially in the case of newcomers, Lajos Szabó delivered lectures only to two or three persons. The circle was different from a simple society of friends, because it had a hierarchy. Lajos Szabó and Béla Tábor were the professors. They were self-made philosophers. Their best book is a short study titled *Vádirat a szellem ellen* (Indictment of the Spirit) published in 1937.

This is what they wrote in the introduction to this wonderful essay on the critique of culture: "Someone should at last undertake the embarrassing task of pulling off the veil of innocence from the only factor which has remained so far intact in a world splintered by the *bellum omnium contra omnes*, the spirit. (...) The «creative intelligentsia» seems to have indulged in the position that it occupied in the invisible

hierarchy of society. It was the social stratum which could accuse others without being accused, which could pass judgements without being judged. In addition, the intelligentsia was the eternal secret reserve, the substitute conscience of the world. (...) Nations fought terrible battles, millions died and the spirit could be the accuser. Come and behold the work of politicians! Masses live in abject poverty, classes lose the ground from under their feet, the mechanism of production gets bogged down, and the spirit can again assume the role of being an accuser: Come and behold the social structure! Terrible epidemics decimate whole peoples, sordid sins are revealed, and the spirit can become the accuser again: come and see today's health-care system! And if we also mentioned the depraved standards of morality! All the accusations of the intelligentsia leveled at others are accompanied by the gesture of being ignored: «If only the spirit could rule! » (...) Victims of war and famine as well as the sick and the perpetrators of terrible sins bow with respect when they hear these laments, and also politicians and the beneficiaries of hunger, disease and sin believe that they are innocent when they admit, «Sure, if only the spirit could govern the world!» All of them agree on this point, and all of them adopt the view: «To be sure, the spirit cannot possibly take over.» And world events are based on this harmonious division of roles. Spirit is conceived of as the actor of the world «which, if it were in charge», could work miracles, whereas the rest of the people are those who actually run things. This way the spirit becomes immune, and it is pushed up into the void of irresponsibility. This is the way it is transformed into being the eternal reserve. (...) The most important question runs as follows: Has the spirit ever made serious attempts to capture leadership for itself, or more exactly has it created the preconditions for this decisive step *within itself*?⁴⁹

In addition to Marxism to which they had a rather critical attitude, the main source of inspiration of the circle was the 20th-century philosophy of the dialogue whose most important representatives are Franz Rosenzweig *Stern der Erlösung* (The Star of Redemption), Martin

⁴⁹ Lajos Szabó-Béla Tábor: *Vádirat a szellem ellen* (Indictment of the Spirit), Budapest, Bibliotéka-kiadás,

Buber *Ich und Du* (I and Thou) and especially Franz Ebner's *Das Wort und die geistigen Realitäten*. As indicated by six note-books found in my mother's estate, Ilka Gedő prepared a practically complete translation of the book.

In Father's recollections on Ilka Gedő the most important ideas of Lajos Szabó and Béla Tábor can be summed up as follows: "The dedicated endorsement of the organic unity of the whole of the European tradition including the arts, science, philosophy and religion; the idea of the unity of language and thinking and its methodological application and an anti-Marxist theory of value. This theory traced back all value-creating activities to «research» which was conceived of as to include also non-scientific research and all activities creating something genuinely new. Yet research takes place in a context. It has to rely on philosophical, cultural and linguistic traditions and their expansion."⁵⁰

Father was not just a scientist. As indicated by his active participation in the Lajos Szabó circle, he was also interested in the arts and literature. He translated long passages from James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. And not only did he do a translation but he also wrote a study trying to explain this rather complicated work. I still have a huge number of his books on James Joyce. This translation was shown to Sándor Weöres, one of the greatest poets of modern Hungarian literature, who paved the way for its publication in the November 1964 issue of *Híd*, a literary magazine which was being issued in the former Yugoslavia as the number one literary magazine of ethnic Hungarians living there. In September 1973 the same material (the translation and the accompanying commentary) was also published in *Magyar Műhely*, the most influential literary monthly of Hungarian émigrés living in Western Europe. Both these journals were practically banned in Hungary during the era of "socialism." In June 1979 some additional parts from *Finnegan's Wake*, accompanied by little figure drawings by Ilka Gedő were also published.

⁵⁰ Endre Bíró: *Emlékezések Gedő Ilka művészi pályáról*
(Recollections on the Artistic Career of Ilka Gedő)

On November 3, 1956 my father saw Pál Maléter's car rolling down *Üllői út*, as the delegation headed by him went to negotiate with Russians on the terms and conditions under which Hungary was to have been allowed to leave the Soviet Union's military alliance, the Warsaw Pact. (Pál Maléter was the minister of defense of the revolutionary government. He was executed by the Soviet-installed regime in 1958.) The following day the Russians attacked government positions and crushed the revolution.

1956 proved to be very important in my parents' lives. Their best friends left Hungary and became immigrants in Germany, Belgium and America. Father and Mother tried to leave Hungary in 1956. Mother and brother Dani had an official passport to the West that they got already before 1956 for medical reasons. Originally, mother was to have traveled to Vienna with brother Dani so that Dani may get the appropriate treatment for the polio he suffered at the age of five.

Father and me, sitting on his neck, set out towards the Western border. We were caught by border police and were forcibly brought back to Budapest. This was in mid-December in 1956, when the Communist state machinery started to recuperate from the defeat and disintegration it suffered during the revolution, and the border was being sealed off by border police. Had the escape come off, Father would have called up mother and brother Dani who, having a valid passport to the West, would have followed Father and me to meet in Vienna.

I know very little of my parents' marriage. They quarreled a lot, and they had a lot of family problems. One of them was poverty. From 1949 on, father stayed aloof from politics. This was such a firm determination that at the beginning of the 1960's my parents failed to notice the change in the political climate, the silent and gradual transition from an absolutely totalitarian into suave dictatorship.

My parents had to cope with financial problems all their lives. We were always indebted to relatives and friends. As far as I can remember, this changed only after 1970 when parents returned from a one-year study

trip in Paris. In connection with this, it is worth mentioning one interesting passage in my mother's diaries dealing with the Biró family's finances. My parents always had financial problems. Mother believed that the Biró family was forced to maintain a life style different from what would have been possible. We had to live in "pretended poverty" which caused mother to have a bad conscience for not taking a job. According to Mother, she should have asked father a simple question: how is it possible that with your income being equal to or even somewhat higher than that of an average double-earner family, we live in modest poverty, being able to buy just the basic necessities of life. "Only subsequently do I feel a lot of resentment about the past, since now I see that our poverty was the result of an outrageous game," writes mother. According to mother's note, one day she recommended that they should make records of only the extra revenue and the extra outlays, to which Endre blurted out: "Never! If I did that, I would be a fool. Then I could be asked, where the hell did all that money go?" Mother thought that father refused her proposal for a simple reason: it would have created clarity in the finances of the Biró family. This way, the amount of unaccounted money would have been reduced to those sums whose receipt was acknowledged by father.

To me the whole writing is a rather convincing attempt to show that Father was forced to give money on a regular basis to someone named by mother as the "Unknown Insatiable Stomach (UIS)". This assumption is followed through by a detailed and rather convincing description of the methods whereby father pretended the family had less money at its disposal than was actually the case. The most important accounting tricks which were used by him for misappropriating considerable amounts were: recording less revenue than was actually received, recording an outlay twice, deliberate miscalculations, since the very same calculation very often involves amounts of five different magnitudes (fillér, forint, ten, hundred and thousand forints).

Mother and Father went to Paris for a year in 1969-1970. I was 17 years old then and was left behind with Dani, my brother in Hungary. It is highly probable that we functioned as "hostages" so that the Biró's

family defection to the West can be prevented. "During our stay in Paris the same accounting tricks were continued but with much higher sums, " continues Mother. "As soon as we arrived in Paris, we started to wait for the letter notifying us about the amount of the supplementary scholarship scheduled for this year. Endre could not hide the letter from me which notified us that we would receive a nice sum. In addition, there was the official scholarship and the fact that Endre's salary in forints was also being paid during that period. We had «luxury» expenses, like taking friends to a restaurant or going to the theatre."

After a while, mother was surprised by what she saw: recording extra, "luxury" expenses really made sense, since they suddenly increased threefold. According to mother's notes, she remarked to father: "The same thing is going on here, as at home. For example, you recorded a lower salary than you actually expected. And, before leaving Hungary, you suddenly took out 2,000 Forints from the drawer of your desk and you said that it had mysteriously disappeared." "Yes this Hatschek money was stolen by you," replied Father. (I will explain later on how this name, the name of my best friend was mentioned then.)

Mother never learned to whom these "evaporated" sums were given by Father. My guess is that they were given to someone who blackmailed father for a long period. This is a weird tale, and however much I tried to examine, I could not figure out what this story is all about. According to mother's notes, father heaved a sigh of relief, when mother solemnly promised to him she would not tell any of father's relatives, how much father earned in Paris. (If mother had reasons to be jealous of a woman she surely would have found out who the woman blackmailer was.) Maybe father had to give money to one of his relatives. If that is true, then the money was probably given to grandmother as alimony. But this is already theorizing. What is absolutely sure is that I will never know what happened.

After mother's death in 1985, father's health declined rapidly due to emphysema and high blood pressure. I had a flextime job that enabled me do the home-care ideally. I had to go to the office only twice a week, and my work performance could be monitored well even

though I worked from home. On May 28, 1988 I got married. At the time of my marriage, my wife, Judit had already lived with me for five months, and she had got on very well with father.

Father was persuaded by Margit Gráber to go on a holiday. I was clearly against this trip. I asked Endre to abandon his plan, but all was in vain. I asked my brother, Dani and his life-mate, Éva to persuade father not to go. They did not help me. I knew father had been in such a poor condition that a journey like this would pose an immediate and serious threat to his life. Father had been living on oxygen that had been delivered to our house on a regular basis in huge steel tanks for several years then. Nevertheless, he was offered his cousin's, András Bíró's help and he went down to *Velem*, a small village on the Western border of Hungary. The family of Dani's life companion had a holiday cottage in this small village lying in close vicinity of the Austrian-Hungarian border. According to plans, father would not stay with them but in a guesthouse in *Velem*. Dani told me how ideal this would be, since Father would stay in a separate house, but he also would get help from Dani and Éva. Father was so weak he could hardly walk. Nevertheless he was talked into leaving his home, his nest which could have preserved his life for quite some time. Father left and within an hour I knew I would never see him again. I burst out sobbing. Judit, my wife told me we should go down to visit him. So the same weekend we went down to *Velem* to visit father, whence we went to *Pápa* to visit Judit's parents. On Monday afternoon we were back in Budapest to learn that Endre died the previous night, on June 13, 1988. On hearing Dani's voice. I heard something I will never forget. He said father had died the previous night, but with so much hatred that, to this very day, even remembering Dani's words makes me shiver. He said, "It is over". I started to shout: "You killed father, father should not have gone to *Velem*. Had he not gone, he would still be alive..." Since Father's death twelve years ago, practically none of Father's relatives has visited *Baross utca*. Father's relatives started to direct the hatred they once felt against my mother against me. They wanted to maximize the harm to our family. Relying on their instincts, they gave their moral and emotional support to Dani and the other, relatively healthy family member, Dávid became the black sheep of the family.

6. Brother Dani

The sad truth is that there are people and families who sort of attract tragedies. To my horror or, in other words the ambassador of misfortune is an evil spirit who selects a person or even a whole family, and does not let go until everything is destroyed.

Just take, for example, my uncle's boss. He was sentenced to death and hanged at the beginning of the 1950's in one of the show trials. The widowed wife was left with two children. Soon her young daughter died. Mother and her girl came back from an excursion on a Saturday evening. The little girl got high fever and had to be hospitalized and she was dead by noon on the following Monday. The son from the marriage went mad and committed suicide.

My brother, by five years my senior was born on September 26, 1948. I know next to nothing about his first years. At the age of six a series of calamities started: Dani's left arm became paralyzed due to polio. His arm was treated at the Pető Institute where the therapy focused on moving and stretching the paralyzed limbs. Thanks to the treatment, Dani's left arm grew to full length. However, the paralysis could never be completely cured, even though, seeking the best medical treatment, Dani, Father and Mother travelled to Paris and to Switzerland. At the age of 11 Dani suffered an accident due to which a loss of consciousness lasting a few hours occurred, and at the age of twelve he had to go to a sanatorium for six months due to the onset of tuberculosis from which he fully recovered.

In the years from 1962 to 1966, Dani went to a special maths class of an elite grammar school that was also a teachers' training school. Due to some fortunate circumstances this class of the *Fazekas Mihály Gimnázium* came to be made up of a number of child prodigies in maths. Many of Dani's classmates became very famous mathematicians. Mention must be made of the "Big Five" Miklós Laczkovich (being referred to by Dani just as *Mik*) is now an academician and professor of mathematics at ELTE University of Budapest and at Yale. He solved a problem, which had been puzzling

the scientific community for sixty years, and became world famous. *The New York Times* wrote a special feature praising his achievement. István Berkes is currently senior research fellow at the Institute of Mathematics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. László Lovász an academician and professor at Yale. Most recently he got the Wolf prize, the most prestigious award that a mathematician can get, for his research in combinatorics and information technology. For all his talent, József Pelikán did not publish much but he became a teacher genius. Lajos Pósa was a real child prodigy: at the age of 13 an article written by him together with Pál Erdős, the world famous mathematician, was published. Lajos Pósa did not regard academic advancement important and he also concentrated on teaching maths for children.

These are just the five most famous members of the class; almost all the others had exceptional careers. The wonder class had ten math lessons a week, and it was often visited by university professors including Rózsa Péter and Pál Erdős. The members of the class developed a culture of their own that, by virtue of some miracle, was exempt from rivalries. This good atmosphere gave all the members of the class a special impetus. The members of the class loved, in fact, they almost idolized their history and geography teacher, Gyula Komlós who was also their form master. (He was being referred to for short as *a Bácsi*, meaning *the uncle* which was both a nickname, but also indicated the class members' love for their teacher.) As far as I can remember him, my impression was of a good intentioned man with some ironic gestures, uniting a smile with a tinge of bitterness, around his lips. There might have been tensions, likes and dislikes among the class members. However, most of the time I met the members of the wonder class, they seemed to be like characters from Winnie-the Pooh who are united by some hidden bonds of love, solidarity and tolerance for one another. It soon became clear that Dani would go to the Arts Faculty, and this was accepted without the slightest reservations.

This is what father had to say about his attitude to his two sons, Dani and me. "Dani was talking and talking. Things were just the other way round. The second child is usually the favorite of the family, and he is preferred to the first-born child. In the Biró family it was the other way

round. And this proved to be fatal. (...) I preferred Dani to David. By the time I had realized this, Dávid had completely retreated from me emotionally, it was too late." Reflecting a knowledge of Freudian psychology, the interviewer commented as follows "Yes, this was after he was three. By that time all the important events have occurred."
(OHA)

My relationship with Dani became quite complicated. In fact, whenever I examined my feelings for Dani, I realized that emotions of brotherly love often alternated with pity, sometimes anger over Dani's behavior, and in the worst moments even enmity towards my brother. I always wished him well, but very often I had the feeling that I could not really help him and I often thought I had better keep aloof from both the troubles he caused and the troubles he underwent. My other feeling in connection with Dani was respect for his knowledge. When I was a kid, I often toyed with the idea that some day Dani would become a very famous historian of ancient civilizations, and I would be his secretary, and as his secretary I would not have to be bothered about what I become when I grow up because it would be enough and reassuring for me to know that I am Dani's secretary. The reason why I know this for sure is that my younger daughter Zsófia asked me what I wanted to become when I was a child. Instead of making up a lie, I wondered a lot and suddenly remembered that I wanted to become Dani's apprentice or secretary. "This would be an easy life, " I thought to myself. "Dani is already a world famous scholar and I am his secretary."

Dani's troubles started at grammar school because he suffered from insomnia, and his form master often allowed him to be late for school. After grammar school he started to study French and history at the Arts Faculty of ELTE University in Budapest. He was 22 and I was 17 when our parents went to Paris for a year. Father knew some trouble was looming on the horizon: "Dani was the genius. He was deemed to be the genius by his many admirers, but I was appalled by the fact that he himself did not have any practical wisdom governing *his* life."(OHA)

Dani finished his thesis in Egyptology in 1972. This was a pioneering achievement then: a translation plus the detailed commentary of the Egyptian *Book of Two Ways*. I guess Dani was probably the first who translated this work of ancient Egypt. He did a complete translation of the *Book of Two Ways*, indicating all the possible text variants and provided his translation with ample commentary that interpreted the work in terms of the philosophy of religion. I suspect anybody having done this translation should have been given a Ph. D. for this work. (As a by-product of this thesis, Dani managed to decode the meaning of about a hundred ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs unknown until then.) Dani worked very hard. He started to work in the afternoon and in the evening, he moved over into a small room, where he could stay up all night and carried on working till two or three the following morning. Then he went to bed and slept till 2 p.m. He had lunch and after a short rest he started to work again. The words or maybe the text variants were recorded on cards.

Some two or three years later an American research team translated and published the very same text. His professor expected Dani to compare his version of the text with that produced by the American scholars shortly summarizing his findings concerning this comparison. Had he done this, he could have got his Ph.D. in Egyptology. However, probably due to his illness and the lack of some psychic defense mechanism whereby he could have warded off some of his professors' intrigues, he never finished his work. Maybe I am biased, but I would have given Dani the Ph.D. even though this part was missing from the thesis. Why? I would have reasoned this way: let us be lenient this time, because maybe this will give the Ph.D. candidate such a decisive impetus that he will get over his mental problems. If he won't, he will drop out from Egyptology anyway.

Dani got married in 1972, but as if he himself wanted to bring trouble on himself, he behaved so foolishly that his wife, Marianne Márkus divorced him very soon after their wedding. After his divorce, Dani no longer wanted to continue to be a research assistant at the Department of Egyptology. A suicide attempt followed, and a psychiatrist treated my brother. Our parents bought Dani a flat which was in a terrible condition. Nevertheless it offered the well-deserved

opportunity for leaving the family house. It was at this time, on March 13, 1977 that not just trouble but tragedy happened.

In a psychotic fit Dani attacked and seriously wounded father. In terms of the criminal code, this was a homicide attempt committed in an irresponsible frame of mind resulting from schizophrenia. Mother always thought that this tragic event was attributable to the so-called halo effect often ensuing only days after having taken drugs. She believed Dani had been offered drugs at a party even though his friends had known then that he was being treated for mental disorders.

I will never know why this tragedy happened. However, I am inclined to believe that Dani really suffered a schizophrenic fit, and ever since this time, bordering on some miracle, his disease has been basically kept under control. Most of the credit for that goes to Éva Kalmár who has been Dani's life-mate and companion for the past nearly twenty years. Dani has translated books from French, German and English and, relying on Éva's help, even one from Russian on the Dead Sea scrolls. He translated among others significant passages from Franz Rosenzweig's *Der Stern der Erlösung* (The Star of Redemption), Martin Buber's *Ich und Du* (I and Thou) which had been published twice in his Hungarian translation. In the past ten years, I have had no friends at all. In contrast, Dani has lots of friends and he is a very likeable and attractive person.

7. I Grow Up

I was born in Hungary on February 19, 1953 a few weeks before Stalin, the great "teacher" of small Communist nations died. According to *father's* recollections in 1956, during the days of the revolution, I as a small toddler tried to grasp what was going on. I did not really understand what happened. I only saw the rubble, torn out cables, and I was rebuking "them bad guys" for having caused so much havoc. There was heavy fighting especially in the center of the city. We lived at the junction of *Üllői út* and *Baross utca* and it was from here that Russian tanks launched their attacks against the Killián barracks, which was occupied by the freedom fighters. From time to time, a

Russian tank started to roll down *Üllői út*, and after firing a few shots at the barracks, it retreated. Dániel, my brother told me that father had been observing the events from the window of our flat on the third floor, and whenever a tank started to go down the *Üllői út*, he called up the barracks informing the "rebels" a tank was going to shoot them soon. On one such occasion, a few machine gun shells were shot into our flat. I remember that in one of the rooms overlooking the street there really were the traces of a few shots for quite some time. The family was sitting in the cellar, waiting for the fighting to be over.

The first thing *I remember* from my life is 1956, are the days of the revolution. I was three years old, I was sitting on father's neck and we were in my uncle's flat. We have either returned from an unsuccessful attempt of crossing the border and fleeing into the West or were just setting out. Anyhow, I am weeping, in fact, I am howling like hell. This memory snapshot still lingers in my memory.

When I was nine years old, Budapest looked very different from what it is today. Elizabeth Bridge, the modern suspension bridge erected over the Danube in the heart of the city, was just being reconstructed. For us, children one of the favourite pastimes was to walk down to the river side and to watch the bridge being built. My parents did not care about us. We were raised according to the principle that parents should not care about their children. According to this theory, it is perfectly enough for children if they get enough food and shelter and a good family library is available. When I was a child, it was very disturbing that I did not get an explanation for any of my questions. I suspected something terrible must have happened during the war to my parents, but what it was exactly I could not even guess. I also knew that my parents had a very negative opinion about the Communist system. They retreated into the world of their own and read books and discussed subjects which were then hot issues in the West, and here in Hungary practically no one knew about them. Mother borrowed and read the best books on art history from the nearby Budapest Municipal Library. This library had a fine collection of Hungarian, German, English and French books. Recurring topics in my parents' discussions were the sins and crimes of the Communist regime. Father and mother hated the system with a fervor as if they

had owned an estate with an area of several thousand acres that was confiscated by the Communists. Their hatred for the system was coupled with the fact that they were completely out of touch with the realities of Hungarian life. It was in 1979 when we had a television set for the first time. On the official holidays, such as May Day, father and mother stayed at home. I was always surprised to see how many people felt enthusiastic about May Day with all its official propaganda. I knew we were Jewish, but I never dared to ask why my parents have completely abandoned all religious practice. In father's case the explanation was simple, since his parents - as I have already mentioned - converted to Christianity out of fear in the era of white terror in 1919-1920 which followed the red terror. The only contact we had with the Jewish community was the paying of taxes. Every month an old man came to collect the taxes which were paid by Mother. This was only in the early years. Later on, I do not remember any tax collectors coming to our home. The topic of being Jewish was taboo. It was never discussed. I felt I was different from non-Jews, and I did not have any positive image about being Jewish. I looked on our being Jews as a misfortune. Being Jewish felt like being dirty. I guessed there had been some secret in the background, but I never dared to ask what it exactly was. All of these emotions might have been a reflection of the fact that, "the ego of the Jewish victims was systematically destroyed by physical and psychic means. The victims were deprived of their identities, social roles and relationships."⁵¹ It is quite strange, but it is true that my parents were much more open about the horrors of Bolshevism than those of the Nazi era. For example, well before the publication of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's book on the Gulag, my parents repeatedly talked about the history of Soviet Russia. They read Arthur Koestler's book titled *The Yogi and the Commissar* in German which -among others- had a long study on the famine in the Ukraine, and how, based on census data, Koestler realized that millions of people were unaccounted for in the official Soviet statistics.

⁵¹ *Studies on the Holocaust in Hungary*, edited by Randolph L. Braham, Csengeri Institute of Holocaust Studies, New York 1990., p. 245.

The only person who helped me in this psychic nightmare of loneliness and neglect was my grandmother, Emma Gráber, the only one of my grandparents who was still living when I was a child. I regularly visited her and took German lessons from her for at least six years. During these lessons, I started to see how strong a tie existed between German and Jewish cultures. This guess was nourished also by the fact that at home we had hundreds of German language books from the period before the First World War. These books used to belong to my maternal grandfather, Simon Gedő. I always looked on them as the remnants of a lost world, and I started to ask myself questions about the nature of this world. Grandmother lived together with my uncle's family and I liked going to their house, because it was always so nice and clean there. Uncle Gábor's family and grandmother lived on the Buda side of the town in a very nice neighborhood. Though a tenement building, their house was not so huge as ours. Only a few families lived there. At grandmother's I did not always get the best food, but everything was so clean. Served in a clean kitchen, even bread and butter, tasted well. I liked learning German, because I soon realized that all my ancestors spoke German very well, in fact, many of them had German as their mother tongue. Around the age of fourteen I could already read German books. My parents and my uncle had many of Franz Kafka's books. I liked Kafka very much, because I had the feeling that my family experience was very similar to his. I knew very well that the relationships within our family were far from being healthy, in fact they were awful. I was deeply impressed when I found in grandfather's library an original and first publication of Kafka' short story *Das Urteil, Eine Geschichte von Franz Kafka*. (Yes, grandfather did buy that book. It was the first publication of this bizarre and grotesque short story, back in 1916 by Kurt Wolff publishing house in Leipzig. Simon Gedő's initials are nicely written at the bottom of the title page.) I liked Kafka. I soon became convinced that language was one of the means that helped Kafka cope with his world. This language was German, the language of most of my ancestors. To me being Jewish and learning German became somehow associated even though I knew what the Germans did during the war. I learned German very diligently. Although I went down to the playground and I played a lot with my friends, I always had a German book in my pocket, and quite often I just sat on a bench and I was reading it. I did not want to play

all the time, and I did not want to become involved in all the naughty tricks we, the young boys did. Only now do I realize that without my grandmother's love and care I would have lost very much, in fact I would have been deprived of the very skills that ensured a livelihood for me for a long time.

In my childhood I always had the feeling that somewhere outside of Hungary is the normal world, while our Hungarian world was not normal. I said to myself: "Take, for example, Swiss chocolates, they are far better than Hungarian chocolates. Why can't one get really good chocolate in Hungary! Is it so hard to produce? I always had this feeling that out there everzthing is much better. The first "out there" was anything outside our family. I was convinced anything outside my parents' family had been better than our own family world. The second "out there" was the West. "Out there in the West everzthing is better," I said to myself.

When I was an adolescent around the age of fourteen, mother often had terrible outbreaks of anger. When she shouted, when she lost control. I may have been sometimes impudent and rather difficult to get on with, but I definitely gave no reason for such outbreaks of passion. I also knew mother was not under the influence of alcohol.

A psychological study written on the personality of Holocaust survivors points out that "in spite of the differences of their character traits and life situations among different individuals a recurrent experience was the conspicuously strong disposition toward regression. Such primitive defense mechanisms occur as negation, splitting, and projection." It is quite a safe assumption that, in situations of conflict, under duress, mother could not objectively see the situation she had to cope with. ("Characteristically, in all these mechanisms the past inadequately - or sometimes so - gets mixed up with the present. The ego damages render the person incapable of using the otherwise intact higher-level defense mechanisms" ⁵²) Instead, she slipped back into an emotional state that she underwent in 1944 in the yellow star house. She

⁵² *Ibid.* pp. 245-248

attacked her opponent with the same fervor and hatred she felt against the Hungarian fascists. "Mother likes to be angry," father remarked sadly. Whether he knew the hidden springs of mother's seemingly irrational mobilization of anger and despair, I will never learn. I wish he was by my side and I could ask him.

Maybe the reader still remembers my mother's memo and speculations about how money earned by father was being embezzled by father for years, because, apparently, it had to be handed over to a person whose identity was not known to mother. Three weeks before the start of my parents' trip to Paris 2,000 forints (back then in 1969 quite a nice amount) disappeared from father's desk. At father's request, Dani called over Laci, my closest friend to our flat, and father asked him if he had known anything about this money. My parents did not even inform me about Laci's visit. However, he was accused of having stolen the money. He was so much infuriated by these accusations that he and all his friends broke off all contacts with me. In vain did I try to explain to him that I had not known anything whatsoever about this plot. The dispute about the "stolen" money was a nasty one. My parents never apologized for having accused one of my best friends of stealing money from the Biró family. I lost all my friends at the age of seventeen. I have not had any friends since then.

Anyhow, the following summer, at the age of eighteen, Laci went to Italy to visit his aunt and he did not return to Hungary. He went to America and I heard from him only sixteen years later. I got a letter from him informing me that he was living in Fort Lauderdale, Florida and he was learning to become a pilot. Laci once even called me up from America. Unfortunately, I was not at home. He spoke only with father. He got into trouble, and started to complain about a rather unfortunate situation he had to cope with. He had been dating a Hispanic girl for a long period and he was afraid of the girl's family compelling him to marry the girl. He was determined not to marry, but he did not know what would happen if he said no. He was afraid the girl's family might take revenge on him for not marrying the girl. I wonder how father reacted to this.

My parents went to Paris at the end of August 1969. I was seventeen then and was left behind with my brother. We received money for the household from my uncle, Gábor who conscientiously managed and kept records of father's Hungarian salary. These were really hard times. Not only did my best friends break off all contacts with me, but also my parents were not with us. I found a lot of well-intentioned people among Dani's university colleagues who helped me a lot in learning English. One of Dani's closest friends moved to our flat with his lover. It was not really enjoyable to listen to the strange noises of a tempestuous love life in the room next to mine. Various people lived in *Baross utca* for short periods of time. One of them was János Varga who was typing all day long, because he made money by typing for university students. There was a lot of turbulence in *Baross utca*. So much so that at mid-March 1970 I moved to my aunt Gábor and lived there until the summer holidays, when I visited father and mother in Paris.

I spent a week in Paris and then went to London, where I stayed with an English family. In the mornings I went to a language school in Oxford Street where I attended a course of English. I still vividly remember the Krishna group which marched along Oxford Street exactly at the same time every day, always singing the same happy tune over and over again until they got into an ecstasy and probably did not really know where they were or what they were doing.

I lived in Greenwich, where the famous royal observatory is to be found. Every morning I took a bus which took me to the City. It was a very long journey, but I did not mind. Apart from looking out of the bus window, I could learn a lot on the bus. An old friend of the Gábor Biró family, Sarah Selwyn and her husband met me at the station and on the way to the English family with which I was to stay they showed me the Royal Observatory. I still remember the zero latitude line engraved into granite stone. Life was so slow-paced in England and so comfortable, and everything was of such good quality.

8. University Years (1971-1976) and the Start of my "Career"

In 1970 I started university at the Arts Faculty of ELTE University in Budapest. I studied English and German. Unfortunately, I could not find a teacher with whom I could have the relationship of a master and his student. I could only count on myself: what I liked about university the best were the quiet hours spent in the university library. I liked being secluded from the bustle of the world outside, and I also liked learning at the library. The only things which frustrated me at the library, were young university students of the opposite sex. There were so many pretty young ladies at the library, and I had the misfortune not to have been able to get acquainted with any of them.

I liked my fifth university year the best. I spent the first semester in Jena, a small university town in East Germany. I liked living in Germany. I always had the feeling that the fact, rather the awareness of East Germans, that the other half of the nation lived in freedom somehow made life more bearable for East Germans than for Hungarians. In contrast to Hungary, small facts always reminded Germans of the untenable nature of their political situation in the long run. I enjoyed having left Hungary and my family behind. My Jewishness and living in Germany did not cause much of a conflict. I never told my German colleagues that I was Jewish, but I guess they guessed I was Jewish. What I liked about life in Eastern Germany was the fact that some remnants of the good old bourgeois world seemed to have survived both the fascist system and the then prevailing Communist system. I had the impression that people were more reliable and more predictable. To be sure, they were perhaps more selfish than Hungarians but at least they were not so phony all the time. The young German university students I had the opportunity to get acquainted with were so much different from my Hungarian colleagues. Germans were often very hard on you, but they were basically fair in their behavior. This was in sharp contrast with Hungarians, who at one moment were too friendly with you only to do some nasty thing against you the following moment. Sometimes I thought this was attributable to the fact that this part of Germany, Thüringen came to be first occupied by American troops which were withdrawn only after the West got West Berlin in return for American troop removals. Had it not been for this swap of West Berlin for Soviet-

occupied territories, East Germany would have become a much smaller state than it actually was.

In a letter dated October 7, 1981 Sarah Selwyn, who knew me from 1970 when I visited England for the first time, wrote on me as follows: "I think David is a very intelligent man, but as regards maturity he is not at the level what might be expected of a man aged 30. He is still at twenty..." I think Sarah was right. I was not mature enough in my social contacts. I could not behave well. I often trusted those who did not deserve my trust and was skeptical about other people's intentions. Having been neglected so much by my parents. I simply failed to learn many of the skills needed for success and for avoiding frustration.

I did not have the right knowledge of life and of the opposite sex when I jumped into an early marriage in a very rash way. Not only was my wife five years older than I was, but she also had an unreliable character, and as I look back on her, I don't think she was very pretty either. Anyway Magdi, my first wife, seduced me. I am fully responsible for my irresponsibility. I do not know what would have happened if my parents had tried me to dissuade from marrying Magdi.

The truth is that my parents were all too glad to get rid of me. They never warned me that it might be safer for me to marry a Jewish girl. I myself had no concern about marrying a non-Jewish girl. Back in 1977 I had no Jewish pride or consciousness. I was socialised into believing that my Jewish origins were irrelevant. Father and mother may have believed my life was "solved." Thanks to God, my first marriage did not last long. Before my first daughter Zsuzsanna was born in 1978, we no longer lived together. My wife divorced me legally two years later.

Magdi was an awful person with a terrible character. Unfortunately, she was not able to pursue her self-interest either. She could not really manage her life well. In child rearing she never asked for my advice. In fact, she never allowed my paternal rights to be exercised concerning Zsuzsanna's life and career choice. Concerning Zsuzsanna she always

made the wrong decisions. Magdi's flat was always in a terrible mess. There was a type of disarray in her flat which, to me, is a sure indicator of emotional disorder. Even if Zsuzsa got a new desk or any other piece of furniture there surely would be a cardboard box or something else that destroyed the comfort and the cosines of the room. Back issues of newspapers and magazines were never thrown out. They were stacked up on chairs and shelves until they literally made normal life impossible in the flat. Magdi never realized that chairs and shelves were not for the purpose of storing junk in them. The same happened to old bottles. Hundreds of them were thrown into a corner of the kitchen. If I ever tried to throw out something, Magdi went into a physical fit of hysteria.

Magdi consistently made the wrong decisions concerning Zsuzsanna's education. What this has resulted in is described in detail on the chapter on Zsuzsanna. The truth of the matter is that I terribly misjudged my wife's character. Magdi may have been in love with me for a short while. However, our failed marriage was important to her as an opportunity to get a steady flow of revenue.

I am responsible for marrying in such a rash and wanton way. My decision was motivated by sexual desire, the yearning for growing up and having a family of my own. It is no wonder that I wanted to become independent as soon as possible. However, I was not intelligent enough to overcome my impatience. I did not carefully consider my wife's character. I was not self-confident enough to select a prettier, a more intelligent and a more qualified young lady to become my wife who would have matched me.

Magdi has never taught Zsuzsanna to respect me. From early age on, my daughter learned from her mother that the correct way of behavior was to criticize everything all the time. Nothing was good. Zsuzsanna never asked herself the question what she should do for helping others. However, she was quick to criticize and point out everybody else's faults and weaknesses. Zsuzsa was still a small child when my mother recognized that it was impossible to tell her to stop criticizing everything (including the most beautiful presents she got from her grandparents) all the time.

For years and years I kept silent about this. From time to time, I tried to tell Zsuzsanna to abandon this behavior. All my efforts were in vain. Quite often I told her off. Only during our visit to New York in 1994 after Zsuzsa made me wait for her for more than three hours at the entrance of Guggenheim Museum, did a quarrel break out. I told my daughter once again how fed up I had been with her constant nagging and criticizing. (To be sure, all children have a tendency to nag their parents.)

After the break-up of my marriage, I moved back to my parents in *Baross utca*. There I had a big room of my own, and I lived the life of a bachelor. On average I had two girl friends for periods of three months every year, which became quite boring after a while. In 1981 there was a short period when I moved back to Magdi again. Leaving Zsuzsanna back at her grandparents, I spent two weeks with Magdi in Cambridge at the house of Sarah Selwyn in Cambridge. Magdi traveled home earlier than I did. I stayed another two weeks.

I have already given an account of how father's career started. The job interview father had with Professor Albert Szent-Györgyi was absolutely important for his career. It is by no means an exaggeration to say that it decided father's life. I also had a job interview after having earned a M.A. degree in English and German at the Arts Faculty of Budapest's ELTE University. I did not get the job of an assistant teacher at the department of English at the University of Economics of Budapest for political reasons.

I had a job interview with the head of the Department of English who said he wanted to give me the job. Only his boss's approval was necessary. So I went to see the head of all the language departments, a tall man with black hair, who immediately asked me the question. "What did your parents do in 1956?" I was astonished. I replied the job I had applied for did not have anything to do with my parents' past. Following my reply a short conversation ensued whose atmosphere was rather bad. The interviewer used a rather sinister tone, and I was so nervous that I started to fidget. After some ten minutes the interviewer said, he would personally see to it that I would not get the

job. "You know the University of Economics is a rather political place. We are not in the least indifferent to who the teaching staff are here. I tell you now, you won't get this job. If you don't like this, go and lodge a complaint against me with the rector of our university. But whatever you do, I guarantee that you won't get this job."

This interview decided my professional career. I am absolutely sure that I did not get the job for political reasons. (It would be such an interesting thing for me to get the opportunity to read the files made on me by the secret police let us say between 1978 and 1989. Then I could perhaps learn who spied on me and why I could not get a proper job after graduation from university where I studied English and German. I spent six months in the German Democratic Republic. That was back in 1975. Maybe I was spied on even then.)

As of writing these lines, I could file a request with the History Office of the Ministry of the Interior asking them to hand out the files prepared on me. However, there is absolutely no guarantee that I would get all the documents on me since a major part of the secret files of the Communist regime were handed over to the currently operating secret services. Even if I managed to get some of the documents on me, the law obliges the History Office to delete all the names occurring in all the documents except mine. The staff of the former regime handles the secret files of the former regime. I will describe later on in the book why the political elite that came into power in 1989 decided not to handle the issue of secret documents in a fair way. This is in sharp contrast to what happened in East Germany.

After graduation I did not want to go to a secondary school to teach language at a primitive level. So I started to work for Akadémiai Kiadó, the Publishing House of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, where I became an editor of books on the social sciences published in English. This publishing house was a place of refuge for intellectuals who were not regarded reliable enough by the Communist system to become teachers. Being an "editor" meant a very modest source of income. This was partially justified by the fact that I had a part-time job, which meant I had to go to the office only twice a week. On the other workdays of the week I was expected to work for the publishing house.

However, everybody knew that everybody was taking second jobs. I myself taught a lot at private language schools. My job at the publishing house consisted in organizing the whole process of getting the English translation of books on the social sciences published. First, I selected a translator. When the translation had been finished, I revised and corrected the whole manuscript sentence by sentence. Following this, I gave the text to a colleague, a native speaker who copy-edited the text again. Officially we were regarded to be editors. In reality, however, we were officials, because we had no say whatsoever in selecting the books to be published. The publishing house was just the executive organ of a scientific body, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Sometimes I had the privilege of editing very good books on demography, social history, economic history and sociology.

When the regime collapsed in 1989, it had become clear to me that the staff of Akadémiai Kiadó would soon face massive dismissals. I gave notice and I started to work for a small foreign trade firm. After a year, I started to work for one of Hungary's biggest banks. I was a translator and interpreter at the Institutional Development Directorate of XYZ Bank. The English consultants of Five & Six (let us refer to the management consulting company by this name) worked on two projects. The first team was involved in working out the Bank's marketing strategy, the second its human resource and personnel policy. The whole of the project was funded by the World Bank, which practically meant that Western money was used to buy the services of a Western firm. My impression was that the Bank was not getting enough value for the vast amounts it paid to the consultants. However, the Bank's senior management and the consultants of Five & Six did their best to show World Bank representatives how much progress they have achieved on the project. Finally, Five & Six came up with the recommended new organizational structure of the Bank. The moment it was implemented, Bank management had become aware that, unless they themselves sort things out properly, the Bank's day-to-day operation would simply collapse. This was around Christmas time, and most of the consultants had already returned home. The Bank's staff was worked to death to work out a viable flowchart of processes for the Bank. For some curious reason, even these materials, everything had to be translated into English. Once this work had been completed, I

gave notice, since I could no longer accept the consultants' arrogance. (A few years later XYZ Bank was bailed out by the state on account of bad loans inherited from the socialist period. The lofty strategic plans had evaporated into nothing, and the Bank's market share got reduced to a fifth of the value of what it used to be before the "cure" and "consulting" started.)

I applied for a job at the Budapest office of Ernst & Young. I got a job offer and I accepted. The seven years I spent at Ernst & Young were very hard but I earned very well. The only trouble was that I got this job without any external support or networking. In the first four years there was a tacit understanding between me and my bosses. The only precondition under which they were willing to tolerate me, to tolerate me at Ernst & Young was that I was willing to work myself to death. After four years even that was not enough. The wonderful office for two people in which I used to work for quite a long time was taken away from me. For three years I had to work under appalling conditions. Every six months I was pushed to a new place. The last year was the worst. I had to translate in the darkest room of the building. On December 15, 1998 my boss told me I had been dismissed. But he was quite frank. He told me I had to go because the company wanted to give the position I had to someone else, to a better-connected person. I was given two options. I am given notice unilaterally by the Company in which case I get a severance pay worth the total of two months of my salary, or I and the Company pretend that we have come to an agreement on the termination of my employment in which case I get a severance pay of six months. I chose the latter option, which meant that I practically "sold" my job under the threat of a much worse outcome. I did not even consider starting a lawsuit against Ernst & Young, since in Hungary the law does not function. The settling of a legal dispute would have cost me very much and it would have ruined my nerves even more. After trying to get a job for more than three months, I decided to start a small business of my own. Being self-employed, and being the sub-contractor of big translator offices is a very frustrating experience. I had to put up with it, since I decided that I have to have some sort of revenue. The fact that I lost my job was both advantageous and disadvantageous for me. On the one hand, for the first time in my life I was relatively free to do

what I wanted to do. Nevertheless, I more or less kept my daily routine. I worked on my own projects by following the same work-schedule as if I was still employed. I decided to write the story of my family and to think through how the Communist regime collapsed. As a matter of fact, at the time when I was sacked I had already been sorting out the documents of my forbears for more than two years. Two years ago I opened some dusty boxes in which I found more than two thousand letters and other documents. This was quite a challenge for me. I had to decide what to do with this tremendous number of documents. I started to sort them out by the various persons and dates, and I soon ended up having about fifteen folders.

I studied sociology and I got an M.A. degree in it 1982. I wrote several articles on youth culture and the counter cultural movements of 1960's. I read all the American, English and German books available on the subject, and by the time I had finished a book-sized thesis on the subject, I became a conservative critic of pop and counter culture. I was decisively influenced by Irving Kristol's essay titled the *Adversary Culture of Intellectuals*. Only in retrospect, do I understand why I became so much interested in sociology. I wanted to find a means whereby I could express my critical attitude to the Communist system. Very soon a big opportunity for a critique of the regime came. I did not miss it.

In 1980 I heard a commentary in the Hungarian language broadcast of Radio Free Europe written and read by István Kemény. It was about worsening mortality rates in Hungary. This issue started to intrigue me. I asked myself the question how it was possible that living standards had been slowly but gradually increasing, but a dramatic worsening of Hungary's mortality rates (the number of deaths in a given year for thousand persons) had occurred. I started to study the issue and I immediately recognized that the worsening of Hungary's overall mortality rates was coupled with an opening of the sex differential in mortality, that is men's mortality had worsened by magnitudes more than that of women's. I examined the age specific mortality rates, i.e. the statistical figures on the number of deaths per thousand persons in various age groups, and I found that in some of

the age groups men's mortality rates had nearly doubled whereas those of women grew only by ten to twenty percent.

When I published an article on this topic in Hungary's number one social science journal, *Valóság*⁵³, the result was a huge scandal. It really was scandalous for the Communist power holders to learn that in a socialist country assumed to be progressing with great leaps on the road to the land "flowing with milk and honey" the mortality situation was so bad. The other twist to the matter was that the article was alleged to have an anti-feminist tone, and the authorities tried to refute the statements of this article. They had a very hard task since for example the mortality of men aged 50-54 worsened by 70 percent between 1960 and 1988, whereas that of women in the same age bracket worsened only by 5 percent. Likewise, in the same time-span the mortality of men aged 45-49 worsened by 81 percent, whereas those of women by 5 percent. In 1960 in the age group 30-34 men's mortality was 55 percent higher than those of women was. The same figure for 1988 was 142 percent. In 1960 in the age group 50-54 men's mortality 54 percent higher than those women's, whereas the same figure for 1988 was 150 percent.

I asked myself another question. How was it possible that the gap in the mortality of the sexes started to open just at a time when women started to work in large numbers outside their homes, and their roles changed so dramatically? I drew the conclusion that one of the reasons might have been a change in the nature of the relationship between the sexes. Citing an American sociologist,⁵⁴ I wrote that women's roles have become very flexible, whereas those of men have changed only slightly. In Goldberg's view, woman appears on the scene with new demands justified by the women's liberation movement, yet at any moment she is ready to leave genuinely hard

53 Dávid Bíró: A "teremtés koronái" és a "gyengébb nem"
(The "Crowns of Creation" and the "Weaker Sex")
Valóság 1982 /9

54 Herb Goldberg. *The New Male (From Self-Destruction to Self-Care)*, New York, William Morow and Comp. 1979

work to the man. Women's roles have become more flexible than those of men. If the man would like to return to the old division of roles, then the liberated woman, who wants to participate in the world of work, labels her man anti-democratic, an oppressor etc. If, however, the man is "enlightened" and "democratic", then he becomes overburdened to such an extent that this, coupled with his old self-destructive, self-sacrificing behavior, destroys his health at an early age.

The 19th century French sociologist, Emile Durkheim examined the sex differentials in suicide rates and found that "in countries where divorce does not exist or has been recently instituted, women's share is greater in the suicides of married than unmarried persons, (...) Turning to peoples among whom the institution of divorce is widespread, the reverse is the case. (...) From the standpoint of suicide, marriage is the more favorable to the wife, the more widely practiced divorce is; and vice versa."⁵⁵ In other words, in contrast to general belief, men profit much more from marital stability than women do. An American sociologist points out that "although women in general live longer than men, marriage is relatively better for men than it is for women in terms of sheer survival, quite aside from suicide. That is the difference in the mortality rates between married and unmarried women is less than that between married and unmarried men (30 percent compared to 48 percent)"⁵⁶

I compared the surplus mortality of Hungarian divorced men over married men with that of divorced women over married women, and I found that in almost age groups the surplus is much higher for men than for women and that the growth in this surplus is much higher in the case of men than in the case of women. Similarly, the surplus mortality of widowed men over married men grows much faster than that of widowed women over married women. This means that marital

⁵⁵ Emile Durkheim: *Suicide*, Glencoe, Pelican Books, Illinois, Free Press, 1966, pp. 268-272

⁵⁶ Jessie Barnard: *The Future of Marriage*, London, Pelican Books, 1976, pp. 42-43.

disruption and the lack of marital stability are much more detrimental for men than for women.

It is a well-known view of medical sociology that the mortality of the better-positioned social classes is much better than that of the poorer classes. If the mortality of men and women is structured in the same way as that of the well-positioned and badly positioned classes, this means that - all views to the contrary - the situation of women is better than that of men. I explained that it was quite impossible that rapid changes had such a divergent effects on the sexes. A horrid scandal followed. I became rather famous in Hungary. Frankly, it was a reputation I did not really enjoy.

Up to the present day the suspicion lingers in me that the Communist party also fomented the scandal. The crisis of the system became more and more evident at the beginning of 1980s and maybe the Party believed that this scandal is a good means whereby attention might be diverted from the real cause of the of the crisis, the Communist party itself. In the Hungarian press there were more than 200 reactions to this single article written in the magazine *Valóság*. When I was writing this article, in the first place I did not believe it would be published, and in the second that it would cause such a big scandal. I am very proud of having been able to attack and challenge one of the basic tenets of the Communist ideology which repeated over and over again that women are the oppressed half of Hungarian society. If they are so much oppressed, why are there great and deepening and sex differentials in mortality? If anyone knows the answer, he should write an article on it. In 1990 I wrote a Ph.D. dissertation on the comparison of the situation of Hungary' men and women. This dissertation was in the vein of critical sociology. Its critical edge was directed against the alliance between primitive feminist ideology and Communist dogma. It was very much resented, for example, that based on official data, I showed that in Hungarian society there were two "double burdens". One had to be coped with by women who had to co-ordinate family tasks with employment outside the home, the other by men who, having finished their official working hours, had to make increasingly greater efforts to get some extra income in the then blossoming second economy. I could not successfully defend my Ph.D. dissertation. Two

members of the defense committee wrote rather negative reviews on my paper. I prepared my answer in writing and I read it out at the public debate session. The protocol prepared on the debate only mentions that I rejected the defense committee's critique, it did not specify any of the details of my answer in which I also gave an explanation of the method, the contents and the conclusions of my dissertation.

9. My Elder Daughter, Zsuzsanna

The whole thing got started back in the 1980's, when my parents noticed that Zsuzsanna criticized every present she got from me and the other members of the Bíró family. This was, of course, an attitude Zsuzsi learnt from her mother. She believed that it was appropriate behavior to criticize everything, including her father, all the time. Little Zsuzsa was harassing me all the time with instructions and corrections. I tried to get Zsuzsa to stop this behavior in vain. The odds were against me since I was with Zsuzsi only seven-nine hours every week. Zsuzsa was also taught to keep everything that happened at home as a secret, and to get the greatest amount of information on me. (Magdi was seriously ill for a whole year, and I did not hear anything about this.) Whenever I scolded Zsuzsa, Magdi started to say I was wrong and Zsuzsa was right. Magdi failed to recognize how unwise it was to ruin my parental authority. (To speak about an adult's mistakes is completely different from socializing a child into regarding her father a ridiculous, contemptible and pitiable clown.) This kind of socialization does not make for the normal and balanced development of a child. This is even truer for children of divorced spouses. This whole process took a turn for the worse when I got married again and Zsófia, my second daughter was born in 1989. Zsuzsanna had to find an answer to the question: "If my father is a stupid idiot, how is it possible that she remarried, and lives a relatively balanced and normal life?" This question might have become even more pressing when Zsuzsanna saw that I succeeded in saving my second marriage from a serious crisis. Having managed the crisis of my second marriage was clearly in contrast of what Zsuzsanna heard for several years.

Then came Zsuzsa's best girl friend, Petra. She had already several suicide attempts plus a schizophrenic father in the background. Petra convinced Zsuzsanna she had to leave her mother's house and go to another school. This young and "wise" adolescent was also convinced that these two decisive events had to take place at the same time. However much I tried to persuade Zsuzsanna not to go to another school, she refused to listen to me. I agreed with Magdi not to allow this. However, she broke her promise and finally gave her parental permission for this move.

Zsuzsanna came to visit us every Saturday. She usually arrived at about nine o'clock in the morning but at the age of 16 she started to come later, and often I could see signs of insomnia on her face. Since she turned 17, Zsuzsanna has not been telling me anything about her life. This was easy for her since she had been socialized into regarding her father as an enemy. In January 1996 I learned that Zsuzsa had already been having a sexual contact with a man aged 36 for a long time. Zsuzsa's school performance declined so much that she could not pass her final examinations. As of writing these lines, it has been five years since Zsuzsa stopped talking with me in any normal way. Nowadays she always speaks in puzzles.

Zsuzsa was still 17 years old when in September 1997 she moved out from home and I did not know for months where she was living, because neither my former wife, nor my daughter were willing to reveal this to me. Finally, by the end of October, I learned that she stayed at the house of her girl friend and her crazy mother. I had the impression that both mother and daughter were psychopaths. The mother told me she had been a teacher but she had been dismissed from her school because both she and her daughter had become involved with drugs. The woman was quick to reassure me that they were off drugs then. After hours of wrangling with my daughter and threats from the desperate woman to the effect she was no longer willing to give accommodation to Zsuzsanna, because she was expecting some paying guests from Poland, I managed to get Zsuzsa to go home. I ordered a taxi, Zsuzsanna packed her suitcase and I took her back to her mother's flat. It was at this time that I offered my help and recommended that we should turn to a psychologist. Zsuzsanna

refused. I asked Magdi to co-operate with me so that we can save our daughter. She refused once again. I tried to persuade Magdi to form a united front of parents so that we can impose our will on Zsuzsa. At that time we had been divorced for 18 years, but Magdi relapsed into our old hatreds, all the more so since she never forgave me for marrying once again and having another daughter. Magdi desperately wanted me to suffer and she continued to think of me as an archenemy. It was at this time that she realized that Zsuzsi's ruin might also ruin me, and so she decided to let Zsuzsa drift further, which, of course, was sheer madness. She may have believed she would show me how much trouble and shame Zsuzsanna would cause for me. She probably thought I would go mad, and my second family would disintegrate. Magdi was wrong. I very soon realized I had completely lost all control over Zsuzsi and the circumstances that were ruining her. Very soon I decided to get out of this game both physically and emotionally. I realized I had no chance at all of influencing the course of events and my daughter's fate. I stopped trying to control a situation that was beyond my human powers. This decision was helped by my conviction that Zsuzsanna became involved with drugs.

Magdi refused to co-operate with me in controlling Zsuzsa whose regular Saturday visits to my home degenerated into a series of nasty quarrels. Zsuzsanna was not willing to talk with me about anything and she took every opportunity to embarrass and harass me and my second wife Judit. My daughter's cheeky behavior became accompanied with mental and emotional disorders. A vicious circle arose between Zsuzsa's mental problems and the fact that she had dropped out of school.

Before and after her teen-age pregnancy from which her daughter, Lukrécia was born, another game was going on. Zsuzsanna emphasized over and over again that she could not live with her mother. I can easily imagine that serious problems may develop between a divorced mother living alone and her teenage daughter. However, one must also see that Zsuzsanna had a nice room of her own with a desk, a nice collection of books, a brand new chest of drawers, a bookshelf and a wardrobe. In other words, she had the

physical space of her own to which she could have returned if she had wanted to.

Zsuzsa's life became a mess. On the one hand, she was always told long tales on how rich I was and how I could and, in fact, should buy her a flat. By implication, she always demanded from me that I should solve her housing problem, since she could not live with her mother. She was not willing to tell me how she would maintain the flat without any source of income. She was repeating this over and over again at a time when, due to some unfortunate circumstances about which I will write later on, our apartment was nearly completely ruined due to illegal construction work in the direct neighborhood of our house. But this is just one side of the coin. Magdi tried to blackmail both me and my brother Dani into giving them money, assistance and help. This turmoil around housing problems had been going on for almost three years when on February 18, 1997 Zsuzsa's daughter Lukrécia was born.

At the date of writing these lines, Zsuzsa stopped moving around from one place to another, and probably realized it was not so bad to live with her mother in a three-room apartment two rooms of which overlook a quiet garden. It must be conceded though that these two rooms could have more natural lighting and sunshine. Zsuzsanna has finally put up with the fact that she cannot blackmail anyone into buying her a flat. As far as I know Gyík, who is my daughter's friend and most probably Lukrécia's father, lives with Zsuzsa. Gyík is a soft-spoken psychopath who might have had and still probably has a regular encounter with drugs. Most recently, he sold his flat and spent the money he got for it on a trip to England. He came back without a penny in his pocket. Now, Gyik is both homeless and unemployed, and he does not have any certified skill. According to her doctor, Zsuzsanna is currently a "border-line case", which means that unless her condition improves she will gradually sink into serious mental illness.

I met Gyík for the first time at the end of January 1996. He was staying with Zsuzsa in a windowless shed whose floor was littered with garbage ankle-deep, yes, ankle deep. At the back of the room there was

a nailed in door with iron bars running across. This doorway probably led into a flat whose main entrance was shut down in a rather conspicuous manner.

When I entered the room, Zsuzsa was sitting on a chair, and, probably under the influence of a happy pill, was laughing and giggling all the time. "Why don't you go home to mother?" I asked. "It is so good being here," she replied. Three other people stayed in the room. Gyík was surprisingly sober. Then there was a young girl aged about 22, who, with plenty of make-up, looked *very* pale. Doubled up in pain, she was sitting on a bench, and one had the impression that she could vomit anytime. She told me later on she was taking a medicine which would help her give up drugs altogether. The third person was Dixie, a man around fifty, whom I knew by sight from olden times, when I went to the university club, back in the early 1970's. Dixie was regarded to have been a very talented hobo and guru, because he was reputed to say "wise" things, at least this is what people said about him. For example, once he told me "Did not you know your family is cursed?" Dixie, holding a bottle of wine in his hand, was quite drunk. His face was red, his lips swollen. Even his nose and earlobes were very red. He smoked quite lot but, as far as I can remember, the trendiest Western brands. As our eyes met, I saw the wicked malicious joy on his face. The flicker of his eyes told me: "Look what has become of your daughter!" I listened to Dixie without batting an eyelid. Dixie was sitting on another bench opposite the girl who was not well. He asked the girl a question. Apparently, the girl did not reply fast enough. Dixie immediately kicked her in the face. Zsuzsa was giggling all the time. I tried to persuade Zsuzsanna to leave this place but she refused. After an hour or so I walked out of the room.

Zsuzsa faced the task of finishing grammar school and acquiring the knowledge that would have provided her a livelihood. She failed. She also had to learn how to handle her sexual impulses, and how to behave as a woman. She failed. Instead of facing her tasks, she started a game in the course of which she ruined herself and tried to drag everybody around her down into the vortex. In this game Zsuzsanna became her mother's victim. My daughter became a lightning rod through which my ex-wife, Magdi wanted to destroy me.

She was so insane, that she acted out her hatred against me uncontrolled. My ex-wife was so much blinded by her hatred that she did not notice that, by letting our daughter loose, and by refusing to co-operate with me, she poured oil onto the smoldering fire.

Half way through this terrible crisis I tried to get help from Dani and his life-mate, Éva. In hindsight, I see that once again I made a fatal mistake. (Both Éva and Dani have very much resentment against me. First, they think I cheat them on the Ilka Gedő estate that is I do not split the revenue generated by the estate fifty to fifty. Éva and Dani never really recognize how much energy and money I devoted to this estate in past years. They take it for granted that we split the revenue 50 to 50, although it would be totally fair to set off half of my expenses against their share of the revenue from the estate. Only once did I get permission from them to set off a part of the expenses I incurred in connection with Ilka Gedő. Dani and Éva basically did the same as Magdi. They did not help me in holding Zsuzsa's excesses back. They did not try to strengthen, and back up my paternal authority. No. Dani started to play the benevolent and magnanimous uncle who protects an unfortunate niece against a tyrannical father. His role performance was quite good. All the games played by Zsuzsa vis-a-vis Dani were aimed at getting money, lots of money.

Despite my repeated warnings not to do so, Dani revealed to Zsuzsanna the fact that we had sold some works by Ilka Gedő. This proved to be oil spilt on fire. Zsuzsi became emboldened. She got more and more money from Dani. On one occasion, she started to shout and demand that a really high amount of money be paid to her. Dani refused this request. According to my diary notes, on November 21 1996, my sister-in-law, Éva Kalmár told me that the balance on Dani's bank account had dropped by 489,000 forint (about 2,500 dollars) within a few days, since Dani and Zsuzsa spent a lot together.

And here we get to a very dark corner of this wicked and nasty psychological game. Believing that she has the right to pump as much money out of us as possible, Magdi socialized Zsuzsa into regarding us the "rich" Jews who had the obligation to give money to her. This was Magdi's secret message: " The Jew is rich. The Jew has to be

disemboweled and plundered." This anti-Semitism had an awful effect on Zsuzsanna's psyche. Zsuzsanna ignored the fact her uncle, Dani was an invalid, a mentally weak person, whose left arm was paralyzed, who had to live on a very low pension. She did not seem to notice either that Éva's pension was also very low. Zsuzsanna knew that Dani had some money from the Ilka Gedő estate, and she was totally angry with Dani for not having received her due share. Zsuzsa also failed to notice that the apartment I lived in with my second wife had been as good as ruined due to illegal construction work carried out next door. She did not seem to be bothered by the fact that all of a sudden we could not properly close the windows and the doors of our apartment. Neither did she notice the huge cracks on the wall.

As at writing these lines, the absurdity of the situation is exacerbated by the fact that Zsuzsanna goes to the same woman psychiatrist as Dani does. Once I had a conversation with Zsuzsa and Magdi in the presence of this psychiatrist. I asked Zsuzsa whether she had ever asked for a high amount from Dani. Zsuzsa refused and called me a liar who made up this story. The psychiatrist did not interfere saying that a diary that I kept out of desperation is probably not crammed with lies. No, no. The psychiatrist believes that everybody has made mistakes in this story, and everybody is both a victim and a perpetrator in Zsuzsa's moral disintegration. She ignored the fact that I could never exercise my paternal rights with regard to the decisions affecting my daughter's fate. In fact, all the time, during these years, a systematic denigration and vilification of the father took place.

10. The Devil Stays: Hungary's Negotiated Revolution

I know very well that the "citizen of the new Hungarian democracy is a disarmed person facing an irrational and unjust world and sentenced to moral silence". According to Miklós G. Tamás, in a "plural democracy sensible political rivalry depends on two factors. Firstly, the citizens should accept the view that there really are public affairs, affairs that are not just the reflections of some private interest. Secondly, the citizens should believe that the parties aspiring for government recommend a certain type of the interpretation of public affairs, and they are not just gangs of selfish private individuals.

However, neither of the above preconditions is a psychological reality in Hungary."⁵⁷ It is very difficult to escape drawing this conclusion. The sad truth is that the ideas for which my grandparents' generation fought so ardently are very far from becoming a reality in Hungary. However, in contrast to Miklós G. Tamás, I think that this situation is not just "attributable to the fall of communism" but rather to the circumstances under which the collapse of the old system occurred.

I am reconsidering what went wrong in Hungary. In Hungary, there were big hopes when the former Communist regime collapsed. However, this spirit of optimism has given way to disappointment. Hungarian life is now characterized by a collapse of moral values. Corruption is rampant; the gap between the rich and the poor is growing. The ruling elite, regardless of which political party is in power, is corrupt. The population of Hungary is declining at a fast rate. Hungarian life expectancy is the worst in Europe. The fabric of Hungarian life has become interwoven with indecent behavior. By the end of the privatization the nation had sold eighty percent of its assets to foreigners. Banks, utilities, manufacturing industries and service companies are all in foreign hands. Hungary has by now become a "colony" of the West, in the sense that a colony is a territory in which there are indigenous people but wherein almost all wealth is owned and controlled by foreigners.

Similarly to other countries opened up by globalization, Hungary is an "emerging market" but that simply means Western ownership of all valuable property. The nation's level of indebtedness is hopelessly high. One third of the total state budget is devoted to the repayment of principal and interest. The reduction of our debt is equal to the privatization sales price of recently sold assets, so in fact our indebted country performed a debt for equity swap. No resources are left for education and adequate health care which may prove to be catastrophic for the nation's future. By saying this, I am not saying that the austerity program and the shock therapy of 1993-1994 were unnecessary. However, the extent to which welfare services were

⁵⁷ The April 25, 1998 issue of the daily *Népszabadság*

curtailed along with the simultaneous wasting of resources in other fields of state administration, is appalling. With the exception of the ruling elite and some more well-off social strata, some 35-40 percent of Hungary's population falls back to the level of a third world country.

Undoubtedly, Hungarian society has undergone radical change. Nevertheless, the old style of power wielding continues to exist. This includes manipulation, the fight of small informal groups behind the scenes and, in human connections, a relationship of master and servant. Hungarian society is a bourgeois society which realized liberty and modern democracy only to a limited extent. Hungarian society is full of feudalistic elements, and small informal groups continue to dominate *all* domains of society.

Equality before the law is not asserted which is shown by a series of scandals whose major protagonists cannot really be punished. Whatever crimes they commit, they can get away with everything. Hungarian society is not at all characterized by fraternity but instead by continued petty malevolence, by egotism and indeed a malicious joy over another persons' concerns and problems. The underlying social character determines the life of any society.

After years of dictatorship, the nation's attitudes were not purified, and no honest encounter with the past took place. (In one of his essays, István Bibó, the greatest Hungarian political scientist of the 20th century, points out: "Contrary to the widespread view, we have to emphasize that *in politics you must not lie*. More exactly, you can tell lies here and there, but you cannot base a whole political system or a whole political program on a system of lies." My concern with the negotiated transition is that it took place with a lack of moral guiding principles. "A false ideological construct, whatever field it is applied to, starts a reverse selection," writes Bibó. The main reason why this happened is the secret negotiations that preceded the transition. The nation's political elite made a decision. It wanted a negotiated and secret revolution. This meant that the chances of moral renewal were reduced to zero. The people really committed to building a fairer society could not benefit from the new opportunities. In a society characterized by solidarity, citizens can feel fairly safe. They can be

fairly sure that they will not become victims of dirty tricks since the generally ingrained belief is that a viable society is not possible without a sense of solidarity. Unfortunately, not only did a society with an adequate degree of solidarity fail to arise but Hungary was swept by a crime wave. Today, there are few people in Hungary who are willing to maintain their moral integrity.

At the time of the collapse, there was no catharsis which would have helped the nation to recover its dignity. Instead, various groups of the Hungarian intelligentsia conducted secret negotiations with the more enlightened elements of the Communist party on the terms and conditions under which the "transition" should occur. The very word "transition" or, more recently, the "change of regime," implies that the objective was to avoid anybody getting frightened, anything honest being said and anything revolutionary happening. (It is not by accident that with regard to the events of East Germany the common phrase for the collapse of the Communist regime is the *Wende* meaning turning point and not just a "transition.")

On January 22, 1989 I had the chance to be a spectator at a six-hour long round-table discussion and public debate between the then power holders and the leading figures of MDF (the Hungarian Democratic Forum). The participants were sitting at a huge negotiating table, and those interested could follow the session through a video-network. It was not clear to me why this debate took place just between the Communist and MDF and why the other major force of the opposition, the SZDSZ (the Alliance of Free Democrats) was excluded from it. György Szabad of the MDF said that Parliament should pass an Act on free and fair elections. The newly elected Parliament should create a new constitution on whose basis new elections would be held. To me this recommendation meant a guarantee that new rules of the game would be negotiated and worked out under the wary eyes and control of public opinion. Undoubtedly, this would have been a much better solution to the crisis than the lengthy and secret bargaining with the Communists lacking all moral guiding principles whatsoever, and with the opposition having many traitors among their ranks. György Szabad's recommendation was the only opinion that made any sense at all. Otherwise, I had the impression that all the views voiced by the

major figures of MDF were just phony talk aimed at striking a deal over the heads of the population. The Communists and the intellectuals of MDF struck a secret deal, even though it is important to emphasize that the participants did not necessarily voice the agreed views of their organizations. For example, one of the MDF-guys, Dénes Csengey said that the "model of Communism suffered a historical defeat." He continued: "The Communists must renounce their power monopoly, and, in exchange, the ritual part of the defeat will not be allowed to take place." Another of the MDF guys warned that once MDF has transformed itself into a party, dual Communist-MDF party membership will not be allowed.

I was a member of the VIIth-district organization of SZDSZ (the Association of Free Democrats), the successor of the democratic opposition and the party of the urban intelligentsia. In August 1989 our organization held a political meeting at the community house on *Pataky István tér* in Budapest. There I asked Iván Pető, a senior leader of SZDSZ why the negotiations between the Opposition Round Table (a loose coordination forum for the parties of the opposition) and the Communists were going on in complete secrecy. Why is the press not allowed to cover these negotiations as they go on? Why is the Hungarian public not informed? In his reply, Iván Pető actually made fun of the idea that the press should cover the negotiations through journalists who are practically present at the negotiations. Iván Pető failed to mention that on June 10, 1989 SZDSZ and all the other political forces of the Opposition Round Table had already secretly agreed with the communists that these negotiations should go on in secret. The clandestine negotiations between the Opposition Round Table and the Communists started on June 13, 1989 and lasted till September 18, 1989. The nation's political parties are united by the shame and sin originating from the fact that these negotiations, which laid the foundations of the new system, went on in complete secrecy. This meant that from the very start the Communists' opponents gave up a very important bargaining chip, the force of public opinion. On June 10, 1989 the opposition round table obliged itself to secrecy concerning these negotiations, which meant that the general public could not exercise pressure on the negotiating partners being barred from learning anything about it. In the committees which worked out

the terms and conditions of the transition more than 238 sessions were held.

The moral level to which one of the opposition's major parties, MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum) sank is indicated by an article carried in the October 1, 1990 issue of the daily *Magyar Hírlap* in which Imre Pozsgay (one of the heads of the Communist delegation) admitted that the leader of MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum) regularly informed him on the next negotiating position of the Opposition's the Round Table. In the quoted text of the interview, the head of FIDESZ (the Alliance of Free Democrats) declared: "We knew that József Antall, the head of MDF, regularly visited Imre Pozsgay. We could recognize when such a visit took place because afterward József Antall spoke in a different tone than at the previous session of the opposition round table. Sometimes with László Kövér, sometimes with Gábor Fodor, we attended the session between the opposition round table and the Communists and we knew: whenever conflict sharpened, this was associated with József Antall's visit to Pozsgay. József Antall himself did not deny this. He said that the Opposition Round Table did not have such rules as would prevent him from talking privately with any of the members of the Communist Party. László Kövér and I could suspect: whenever József Antall's negotiating strategy changed, a negotiation between Antall and Imre Pozsgay had taken place." Hinting that the opposition might have been bugged, the interviewer asked Imre Pozsgay, how it was always possible for him to know a change in the negotiating position of the opposition. Pozsgay's reply: "I have absolutely no idea whether the opposition was being tapped or not. To tell you the truth, I never asked for such information gathering. I received the reports of the internal security service as a matter of routine. I did not rely on this source of information for the purpose of the negotiations. However, as indicated by Viktor Orbán, I did rely on personal contacts. (...) My personal contact with József Antall was undoubtedly very good. Most of the time he informed me on the latest developments among the ranks of the opposition in the form of an advice. This means that, based on his recommendations, I could draw conclusions on the latest developments in MDF, the Hungarian Democratic Forum party. (...) The thing boils down to the following:

throughout the whole of the negotiating process I felt József Antall was committed to a negotiated transition....."

Without quoting the above information, one of the best books on the transition also points out: "In the course of the negotiations informal, unofficial cooperation was going on among several opposition organizations and the reform Communists led by Imre Pozsgay."⁵⁸

The minutes of these meetings between Opposition Round Table and the Communists amount to a 3,439-page transcript, and up till now the political elite has not even bothered to make these materials public. (On March 22, 1999, the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Opposition Round Table it was announced that the minutes of the secret negotiations would soon be published.) "All but a few of the plenary sessions were held behind closed doors in the Parliament building and most of the sessions were videotaped by *Fekete Doboz*, a team of young journalists. (...) Although all political parties have consented to the release of the material, some of the individual participants, in the exercise of their «personality rights» have vetoed the idea. By a process of elimination, the wielders of veto power may be tentatively identified as those then incumbent government officials who later became justices of the Constitutional court or served at the sub-cabinet level in the Antall and Boross governments (1990-1994).⁵⁹

A real change in the way politics is done in Hungary can only occur if the secret circumstances under which the old regime collapsed were revealed, and the participants of these negotiations divulge their "secrets" to the general public. What people did in the past cannot be undone any more. However, the consequences of the past may be changed if you are ready to face, to discuss and also to challenge your past deeds.

⁵⁸ *Post-Communist Transition and Emerging Pluralism in Hungary*, Pinter Publishers, London, 1992, p. 47

⁵⁹ Rudolf Tőkés: *Hungary's Negotiated Revolution*, Cambridge 1996, p. 334. and p. 492

Erzsébet Szalai, a renowned Hungarian sociologist, points out that the change in the political system was implemented by three social strata: (1) the technocrats of the late Kádár regime (1980-1989); (2) the democratic opposition; and (3) and the new reform-minded intelligentsia (which was, however, split into a nationalist group and another group following the democratic opposition). The nationalists and the "urban" groups of the intelligentsia, including the members of the democratic opposition among whom the number of Jews was higher, mutually distrusted each other. "The social background of the two groups, also set them apart. The democratic opposition was drawn primarily, though not exclusively, from the urban, Budapest, Jewish middle class and intelligentsia; quite a few of them were children of established communist figures and had a communist background themselves. They sloughed this off by the time they had moved into the opposition, of course, and were committed to human rights and democracy. The populists, on the other hand, were generally from the country, of a more humble background, for the most part non-Jewish and had no past in the oppositon at all."⁶⁰ It is very important to distinguish between these elite groups themselves and their voters.

The Kádár technocrats exploited the differences between the nationalist and urban groups by playing one group off against the other, thereby preventing a genuinely radical turn of events. The mastermind behind this intrigue, the code word for which is the so-called "negotiated transition", was Imre Pozsgay (a senior Communist official already mentioned above). Back in 1987, he helped organize the meeting of Lakitelek to which only members of the nationalist intelligentsia and the populist writers were invited. The strategy of divide and rule, used by the Communists, proved to be catastrophic in terms of the moral integrity of the nation. (The intention of this meeting was to conduct an open dialogue on the crisis and possible ways of resolving it.) With the exception of György Konrád, an internationally known Jewish writer, members of the democratic

⁶⁰ [Post-Communist Transition and Emerging Pluralism in Hungary](#), Pinter Publishers, London, 1992, p. 99.

opposition were *not* invited. Under the protective umbrella of Mr. Pozsgay, the senior Communist Party politician, the participants were allowed to voice (in a very indirect way) the need for the change of the regime. Some politologists write about a secret pact concluded between the Communists and the MDF. It was simply unfair not to have invited the members of the democratic opposition who by then had been openly fighting the Communists for several years. "Where are those who for years had spoken up for the cause of Hungarian democracy and the rights of Hungarian citizens?" asked László Lengyel, a reform communist. This act of exclusion was totally apt to sow the seeds of hatred between the national forces of the opposition and the democratic opposition, the so-called "non-national" forces. This distinction soon degenerated into a split between the so-called Christian-nationalist and the liberal and socialist forces and for anti-Semites into a split between the true Hungarians, and the descendants of the gentry class and Jews. From the start of the 1980's, the word "Christian" gradually regained its main and old meaning, non-Jewish, whereas Jewish was associated with liberalism, moral lenience and also Communism. The tragic rift between the Jewish and non-Jewish middle-class returned. I am convinced that Hungary's political life will become viable only after a real and genuine reconciliation between these two groups takes place. Any reconciliation must mean an honest consideration of the events of the Hungarian Holocaust and real repentance. According to Jewish wisdom the only sure sign of repentance is when one stops repeating the same sins again. We know that anti-Semitism paved the way for the Hungarian Holocaust. True repentance should mean a clear break with anti-Semitism, and a commitment to clarify and to accept the facts of the Holocaust.

The Communists managed to engender hatred between these two major groups of the intelligentsia. While in 1989 the secret negotiations were going on, the internal security forces of the former regime continued preparing reports on the various opposition parties. At the same time, truckloads of incriminating papers of the state security forces were being destroyed towards the end 1989. (Major Mr. Végvári from the Ministry of Interior, who made this public, was prosecuted by a court of the new republic. He was driven into desperation so much so that he had attempted to commit suicide.)

In 1989 SZDSZ (the Association of Free Democrats), the successor of the democratic opposition and the party of the urban intelligentsia, proved to be tougher on the Communists. By calling a referendum, the *only honest* act in the process of transition, they managed to prevent Mr. Pozsgay from becoming the first president of Hungary after the collapse of the old regime. On September 18, 1989 SZDSZ (the Association of Free Democrats), FIDESZ (the Association of Young Democrats) and two other tiny parties refused to sign the agreement reached at the clandestine negotiations, but they did not use their right of veto. (The forces refusing to sign believed that the foundations of a democratic state would be undermined if the Workers' Militia, commanded by the Communists, would not be disbanded, if the presidential elections were held before the general elections, if the Communist Party retained control over all of its assets and if it were not kicked out from workplaces.) Had the presidential elections been held before the general elections, Imre Pozsgay, a senior Communist would have been elected the president of the republic. It is to be noted that, as a result of the referendum initiative, SZDSZ was transformed from a small liberal party having a 3-4% support into a large party having a 15-18% backing of the electorate.

The main party of the nationalist opposition, MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum) won the first election on a harshly anti-Communist platform, but also by emphasizing that, in terms of economic transition, it advocated a less painful version of economic recovery. In the process of assuming power, the plebeian-minded MDF was transformed by its newly elected leader, József Antall into a party trying to imitate the image of western European Christian democratic parties. However, the new MDF-led coalition did not try to curb the increasing economic power of Communist technocrats. Instead, it focused itself on questions of ideology, trying to recreate the style and images of the conservative, anti-Semitic Horthy regime at the end of whose rule, at the end of World War II, Hungary stood in ruins. The most sinister reflection of this was the re-burial of the remains of Admiral Miklós Horthy. The fact that Horthy was re-buried in his fatherland cannot be objected to. However, the fact that a semi-official

media spectacle was organized for a politician responsible among other things for the Hungarian Holocaust did not reflect good taste.

The arrogance shown by the Antall-Boros government (1990-1994) was reminiscent of the arrogance of the gentry, the social middle class of the second half of the 19th century descending from the nobility. Among the members of the Hungarian nobility there has been a centuries-old tradition of regarding themselves as the only and the true representatives of the Magyar nation. This tradition was now revived. After World War I, the gentry middle-class started to separate itself from the bourgeois (mainly Jewish) middle-class.

The Communist nomenclatura shared economic power with the beneficiaries of the Antall regime, only on condition of retaining their own leading role in the economy. Not only was the MDF-led coalition drifting to the right, but it also followed rather unfortunate policies that aroused the hatred of broad strata of the population. This paved the way for the rather distasteful coalition between the former Communists (renamed the Hungarian Socialist Party) and their once fiercest opponents, the leading intellectuals of the SZDSZ.

After the sweeping victory of the Communists (the Socialist Party) in the 1994 elections, SZDSZ entered into coalition with them. These events in themselves would not have been ill-fated, if behind the scenes of democracy, the hidden structures and feudalistic interest groups of the old regime had been dismantled. Unfortunately, however, this was not the case. Both under the Antall and the next government, privatization was in the hands of the enlightened technocrats of the former regime. To make things even worse, the whole judicial system was left intact, which meant that all the scandals and corruption were and are without consequences. Scandal follows scandal and the political elite, the club of the privileged remains intact. The principle of equality before the law is violated on a regular basis. In the Communist regime, the administration of justice was a strongly supervised field where only "good comrades" could work. Now, as in the past, these cohorts help their former buddies get away with everything.

Sadly, the central-rightist government which came into power in 1998 proclaimed itself to be a bourgeois government in contrast to the liberals and the socialists (the descendants of the former Communist Party) who are deprived of the adjective bourgeois and thought to be incorrigible Communists and liberals. This is a very good semantic trick, since *all* the forces of Hungarian democracy have shown that they are committed to a society based on democracy and a free market economy. Branding their opponents as non-bourgeois represents a reincarnation of the arrogance of the gentry and of the nobility. They were repeating for centuries that they are the only true embodiments of the Magyar nation. The forces that came to power in 1998 regard their adversaries not as opponents but as their enemies. Similarly to József Antall and his circle, they regard themselves as the only members, as the only representatives of the Magyar nation, whereas the other side is thought to be "alien to the nation," which is a code word for saying that these parties are led by intellectuals many of whom have Jewish backgrounds. All this indicates that although political correctness already prohibits open anti-Semitism, racially prejudiced ideas are quite frequent.

The agencies of national security and secret services were left intact both under the Antall and the Horn governments and, so far, also by the forces which came into power in 1998. This has serious implications for Hungarian democracy. The reason for this might be that back in 1989, during the negotiations between the opposition round table and the Communists, some secret understandings were reached about which the general public knows nothing. For alleged reasons of national security, many of the data files gathered on the major figures of political life are in the hands of the secret services, which makes these persons vulnerable to political blackmail.

According to current legal regulations, since September 1, 1997 the victims of the Communist regime have been able to file a request with the so-called History Office and ask for their secret files. Any files handed out to the people concerned must only include the victim's name. All other names in the given files have to be crossed out, have to be made completely illegible, meaning that the personality rights of the perpetrators are still being given priority over those of the victims.

In addition, many of the secret files of the former regimes have been handed over to the currently existing secret services. As a result, the old secret services are practically intact up to the present day. This circumstance is closely related to the fact that the members of the new-old elite have formed a club the members of which, so it seems, can practically get away with everything. None of the political parties can be said to be free of corrupt political and sometimes even Mafioso entanglements. There is no equality before the law and the police as well as the public administration have come under the influence of corruption and Mafioso influences. The sad truth is that many of the victims of the former regime, including the author of this book, will never learn the truth about their lives. I will never learn who ruined my professional career.

If we compare the Hungarian developments with those of the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany) we can find a big difference indeed. Although the transition government of the GDR made an attempt to save the *Stasi*, it was finally compelled to dissolve the secret police completely without any legal successor. The revolutionary masses occupied the centers of the secret police, and the files were protected from destruction. Historians and journalists are allowed to view all the files of all the secret agents and secret service staff members, but they do not have the right to get the files on the victims themselves. However, victims may grant access to their files to journalists and historians. The victims have the right to learn who spied on them. All the citizens illegally sentenced to prison or exposed to coercive measures or injustices of the Communist Party may ask for their rehabilitation. The files of the *Stasi* make the victims' rehabilitation easier. Joachim Gauck, the head of the German office handling the *Stasi* files, is absolutely right to point out: "In addition to criminal law processes, an open and critical debate is being conducted on the victims' rights and the injustice they suffered. All the relevant names and addresses are accessible to the victims. This means that a debate, a social learning process got under way, in the course of which the dictatorship undergoes a process of de-legitimization which is hardly possible just on the basis of criminal law. Western criminal law is a very deficient means to digest a dictatorship. There simply is no

possibility for fairly punishing a huge number of legal violations based on a Western pattern. We may pity or welcome this, but this really is impossible. This is why it is so important to work out the forms of delegitimization which exist simultaneously with the legal means of punishment. (...) I cannot accept that by referring to international archive practice in the former Soviet Union and in other post-communist societies, the files of the oppressive regimes are declared to be officially secret and available to certain people only. In my country there is no such thing. All files of the *Stasi* and of the Communist regime are open to us. " 61

What is happening in Hungary? The past is not clarified. All the parties use the weapon of spreading rumors about their opponents. No one is safe. There is continuity between the past and current secret services, and there are no real safeguards that would make it impossible that, under certain circumstances, some political forces use these services illegally against their opponents.

Under such circumstances, Hungary is very far from the ideal of democracy. The circumstance that since the fall of Communist regime free and fair elections were held for the third time in 1998 does not change the fact that Hungarian life and politics have become criminalised to a great extent. The administration of justice does not function well. Corruption is rampant everywhere.

The *consequences of the secretly negotiated "revolution" of 1989*, are catastrophic: the total moral breakdown of Hungarian society which prevents the nation from building a fair community based on solidarity and equality before the law. Democracy is not just going to the polls and casting votes in free and fair elections. It also means a culture of decency, a world in which the media are independent of government power, the courts are independent of the executive branch and of big business, and the police are free from corruption and penetration from the outside. Hungary is very far from these ideals, although the situation is not as bad as in Russia, where similar developments

61 *Élet és Irodalom*, May 22, 1998

currently pose the threat of the total implosion and disintegration of Russian society.

In the following, I shall describe how the lack of a correct judiciary influenced my life. Around December 15, 1994 the resident-owners of our house received a letter dated December 8, 1994 from the Technical Office of the Local Self Government of the VIIIth district informing the residents that the Technical Office issued a building permit to the Real Estate Company of OTP Bank, Hungary's biggest retail bank, for building a petrol station and garage house on the small land area lying directly next door to our house.

By having granted such a building permit, the Office had violated the law and the statutory building rules on several points. A petrol station has to comply with a number of safety standards. However, with regard to the planned facility, these rules could not be complied with for a lack of adequate space. Therefore, OTP Bank's subsidiary, OTP Real Estate filed a petition with the relevant authorities asking for an exemption from a number of the safety standards.

The planned garage house and, on its ground floor, the petrol station, were planned to be constructed in zone 32 of Budapest. According to the zoning laws relevant to Budapest, a petrol station and a garage house can be built under the following conditions. The facility should not have any detrimental environmental effect on the adjacent building in terms of noise levels and pollution; it should not violate any of the official standards (e.g. in terms of fire protection) and the mandatory minimum distance between the buildings should be kept.

Clearly, the facility built next door to us has a detrimental effect on the environment. The builders asked for and obtained exemptions from officially mandatory standards, and the minimum mandatory distance between the petrol station and the surrounding buildings could not be kept. According to the statutory regulations if any of the three provisions cannot be complied with, the new building can only be erected if the building next to it (in our case the house I live in) is either transformed, or demolished or, if it is left intact, it is declared that the house is no longer fit for residential purposes. In a gross

violation of current laws and regulations, both the builder and the Technical Office of the VIIIth district ignored the above zoning rules. Our house filed an appeal against the resolution of the technical office with the Public Administration Office of the Capital, a state organization whose main task, theoretically, consists in supervising the legality of the local self governments' legality. Our appeal was refused but we did not back down. We filed a lawsuit against the resolution of the Public Administration Office which, according to the law, has a suspending effect on the attacked resolution. In response to this, the Public Administration Office made its earlier resolution implementable with immediate effect.

Construction work started immediately. We called out the police to tell them this was illegal. Nothing happened. We called out the representatives of the local self-government. Nothing happened. I still remember the malicious joy on their faces reminding us of their power. Huge cracks appeared on the walls of our flat. For months I believed that the collapse of our house was imminent. I was so terrified that I could not sleep well for months. One day, I decided to tell a Western diplomat what was happening with us. I got the reply that we have to clarify this situation with our government. In vain did I try to explain that our government and our legal system do not protect us, since all these forces are on the other side.

By the time an intentionally slow-moving court declared in a legally binding resolution the illegality of having issued the building permit, the construction of the facility had been finished. The court of first instance acted illegally when it failed to take any measures against a builder who, completely in bad faith, carried on construction work at a forced rate in order to create a *fait accompli*. (On July 15, 1995 our house asked the court to have the construction work suspended. The court ought to have replied within eight days. Instead, it intentionally delayed taking prompt action.) We also tried to ask the prosecutor's office to have construction work on the building suspended, but we got the answer that, as a consequence of resolution No 1/1994 of the Constitutional Court, the prosecutor's office is no longer allowed to interfere with civil law and public administration trials. (This means that anyone can build anything here in Hungary if he has the good

contacts. How sad.) Throughout the whole period of construction, the builder never had a valid construction permit. The unjustifiably slow pace at which the court worked on the case gave further encouragement to the builder to persist in the illegal resumption of construction work, even though the plaintiff of the trial (our house) repeatedly demanded that the courts suspend construction pending a legally binding resolution.

Following this, the builder asked for a "continued existence permit" from the Technical Office of the VIIIth district. In a hypocritical way and in order to blur responsibility for the existence of the newly erected building, they refused this request. (They did not let themselves be bothered by the fact that they were the ones who issued the first building permit.) This was quite cynical, since initially they were the ones who issued the building permit. The builder filed an appeal with the Public Administration Office, which overrode the resolution of the Technical Office of the VIIIth district, and the facility, was put into operation.

The court of second instance violated the relevant laws in several ways. It primarily concentrated on the legality of the permit for continued existence, and did not even address the plaintiff's request which was aimed at having the illegally issued building request cancelled. The court of second instance took into account only those points of the court expert's report which could be used to support its verdict, and it ignored the fact that the official authorities had issued their permits with complete disregard to zoning rules. More than one year has elapsed since our house filed a revision request with the Supreme Court. Since then, nothing happened. The cracks on our walls become longer and wider, and I have to go to bed with the idea that this deplorable situation might end in real tragedy.

Houses in Budapest built around 1900 have the shape of rectangle with a hanging corridor, equipped with a railing, leading to the flats' entrances. In our case, one side of the house overlooks *Üllői út*, the other side *Baross utca*. On the third side of the rectangle, formed by our house, there is a huge tenement house and on the fourth the new facility has been built. The residents of our house have had to put up

with a number of threats to their safety. The builder got an exemption from the rule stipulating that safe access to the building must not be blocked. In the event of fire, the overhead wiring of the trolley bus would prevent fire-engines from approaching the building, meaning that a fire could be put out only with great difficulty, which, in turn, could mean that it could easily spread to the building next door, that is to us.

The running corridors inside the house are huge stone blocks placed on iron bars protruding from the internal wall of the rectangle-shaped yard. Soon after the start of construction work, the building started to sink and cracks appeared everywhere: on the walls, on the ceilings and on hanging corridors, one part of which had to be closed down. Only in response to my repeated request and just in the last minute was this section of the corridor strengthened by iron bars which were welded onto the protruding iron bars. Had this intervention come later, a terrible accident would surely have occurred. Noise and pollution levels have sharply increased. Due to "negligence" on the part of the official authorities no measurements of pollution and noise levels were carried out prior to the start of construction work, which means that there is no basis for comparison, and we cannot prove that noise and pollution did increase a great deal. From the upper left-hand corner of our doors one can see cracks running at 45-degrees angle, indicating that our building is still sinking.

It is also to be mentioned that, already in the mid-1970's when an underground line was built under our building, the internal yard received complete scaffold support even though back at that time no cracks appeared on the walls. Now that there are serious and continuously widening cracks on the ceilings and walls, our house does not get any scaffolding. In order to ensure the safety of the foundation of our house, huge iron planks were hammered down into the earth. According to mandatory construction rules, this means a blockage of the stream of underground waters, which should have automatically resulted in a ban on construction work. As I write these lines, the passage of ground water has been blocked for nearly four years. We have elevated ground water levels with ground water reaching the height of the flats and shop premises located on the

ground floor. The residents of this house live in incessant fear and under increasingly unhealthy conditions. There is simply no technical method whereby our house could be restored to the condition it was in prior to the start of construction work. The residents of the house filed a supervision request with the Supreme Court of Hungary in March 1998. As of these lines (mid-April 1999), we have not yet received a reply. According to our position, both the builder and the Public Administration Office acted in bad faith. The facility was built illegally and, as result, irreversible damage was done both to the building as a whole and its apartments. We hope that our building might be reclassified into another category turning it into a building not suitable for human residence. Hopefully, this would open up the way for compensation. Right now, however, things look really grim since our building is really badly damaged. When our house might collapse, no one knows. There is no point in turning to the authorities since they constitute a massive and impenetrable block of corruption and malevolence.